

So you're an academic ham: three suggestions for non-boring scholarly presentations

Sometimes you need to deeply embarrass yourself to grow.

BY TAYLOR PRICE | JUL 11 2022

I politely invite my colleagues to stop making boring and unorganized presentations that go over time. To do this is to be an academic ham. I don't like it when academics ham it up, and I suspect you don't like it either.

We face a lot of pressure and constraint in our line of work, and I know both students and professors alike can be wracked by bouts of nervous anxiety before, during, and/or after presentations. These are real and hard things and I feel for you. But please don't take it out on the few of us gathered here who are mutually interested in some esoteric (but important!) topic.

I've laid an argument underneath my polite invitation, as academics are wont to do. My argument is this: *You should acknowledge and honour your embarrassing academic presentations because it is one good way of developing your skills from where you are at.* Embarrassing moments are full of wisdom. This means you can use the wisdom tucked into stories about long, boring, and embarrassing presentations to improve your capacity to share meaningful things with your peers – it might feel awkward but it's true, I promise.

I have been to enough conferences that I am hopeful no one in particular will feel called out by what follows. But please know if it feels like I'm talking about you, I have no ill will towards you, and even if I do it is far less intense than the accumulative regret I feel having made these and many more embarrassing mistakes myself.

Suggestion number 1: Define one thing and make one claim within one minute

It's not that hard. Let people know what you are talking about. You know that feeling when someone is about 10 minutes into a 15-minute presentation and you wonder "Sooo, what is it they're talking about?" Well, it's probably because too few or too many things have been defined and the audience has yet to grasp the central thing the presenter wants to say. So, if you're the one presenting, know what the central thing is you want to say, and say it early. Before you go up in front of your peers, try explaining the main thing you want to tell them to a non-academic person in your life. If they are confused about what you're trying to say, even your most erudite peers will be confused to some degree too. Once you get good at this, you should try starting with a story. But, no matter what, say the central thing before the end of the presentation – and preferably before the middle.

Suggestion number 2: Less is better than too much

You need time to pause in your presentations. Many academics have not learned how to breathe while presenting, let alone how good it can feel to execute a well-placed pause. Pausing gives the audience time to appreciate your genius, and if they don't have time to appreciate how smart you are, well, then...

Next, you will make me dizzy if you mention more than two authors under one minute. Obviously, there are

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I understand

something like: “X academic thinks this, Y on the other hand argues something else, whereas Z’s concept urges us to...” — please know each new phrase will multiply the confusion you have already sowed among the crowd.

Finally, I will not produce an example that illustrates the difference between a slide that is too busy and one that is effective. You know what effective slides look like, and you have the capacity to make all your slides effective. If you are emotionally invested in a busy slide, go to the animation tab in Power Point — which will let you have your points gradually appear — and use it!

Suggestion number 3: Don’t go over time

Let me guess. You went over time anyway. Okay, but please don’t keep mentioning that you are over your time. We know. It’s the least of our worries. We saw it coming and there was nothing we could do about it. Our current concern is how you will finish. There are only a few ways of finishing a presentation when you are over time, and none of them are graceful; hence my suggestion. Another especially non-graceful dismount here is reading through the rest of your script as quickly as possible. I’d go as far as to say that it’s mean to your audience.

I cried throughout the entirety of the first presentation I remember giving. I was in the fifth grade and the speech I wrote was about a dinosaur, I think. I don’t remember the lesson I presented about whatever ancient beast piqued my interest and brought me to the stage. But I do remember the lesson I learned after I slumped into my hard plastic chair, exhausted from six minutes of torture in front of my peers. Sometimes you need to deeply embarrass yourself to grow. I’ve continued to learn this lesson in every single facet of my life, and I have no doubt I’ll embarrass myself again very soon. Embarrassment can have more nefarious causes; I don’t think being embarrassed by a bully provides the kinds of lessons I’m trying to get at here. But, that day as a kid with a certain lack of confidence in an elementary school in northern Ontario, my embarrassment taught me that I had a desire to tell my peers something meaningful, and I knew what I should do next time: not cry... or, at least, cry less.

I hope these words represent a transformation of the real and metaphorical tears I’ve cried from boredom, frustration, and embarrassment during academic conferences; specifically, something that meaningfully contributes to my colleagues’ growth and power as scholarly communicators.

It sucks to feel embarrassed and it’s not a state I wish upon anyone, but it’s better to be an embarrassed academic ham than a naïve or a pretentious one.

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