

LSLT Preparation and Peer Feedback Guidelines

Your Language Science Lunch Talk is an opportunity to inform a diverse audience of language scientists about your research area and your particular project. It's also a good chance to work on your skills and confidence with oral presentation.

How to use this document

This document walks you through some suggested best practices for brainstorming, designing, and delivering an effective presentation. Most of it is stuff you have to figure out and work on on your own. However, you can and should elicit feedback in the course of preparing your presentation, and this guide includes some suggestions on how to make the most of opportunities for feedback [early](#) and [late](#) in your planning process.

First steps

BEFORE you start writing your presentation, and definitely before you meet with your peer group, you should have a clear idea of the **goals** of the talk. **WRITE THESE DOWN** so you know you actually figured them out! Consider sending them in an email to your peer group for quick feedback.

1. What is the **main point** of your talk? What do you want everyone in the audience to learn or understand by the end of the talk? (This is similar to figuring out learning outcomes for a class.)
2. Why is the main point of your talk **worthwhile**? The audience doesn't need to think that your work will cure cancer or be super relevant to their own work. But they do need to understand why your work is interesting or important to people in your sub-field.
3. Why is your work **interesting** to you, and what about it do you think will spark the interest of people in different fields? Everyone in the audience presumably finds language interesting, but you should not presuppose that they find it interesting for the same reason you do.

With your big picture in mind, think in more detail about what you want to convey. Again, it's better to do this before you jump into Powerpoint and get bogged down in the details.

1. How do you support your main point? Can you break it down into **subgoals**, a **narrative**, or a clearly structured **argument**? Every single thing in your presentation needs to serve the main point.
2. What "**learning outcomes**" do you have in mind for your audience? If this were a class, and you were going to quiz everyone at the end, what would you want them to know?

3. What **background** do you expect everyone in the audience to have already? Remember that people in other disciplines may not have taken any of the same graduate courses that you have.
4. What aspects of the background or your argument do you expect to be most challenging for people outside your subfield?
5. What aspects of your argument do you expect to be most challenging for everyone, regardless of subfield?

Organization

After you've identified the main point and your general argument or narrative, you're ready to make an **outline**. You can do this in Powerpoint, on a whiteboard, in a Word doc, whatever works best for you. **Don't get bogged down in details or graphic design at this stage.** Make sure you have a COMPLETE outline, all the way to the conclusion of your talk, before you start inserting more content.

So how do you figure out how to structure the talk?

- The formulaic structure of many journal articles (lit review, hypothesis, methods, results, discussion) is useful for readers who want to find information in a hurry. But it may not be the best way to explain your argument to a person who is listening to you.
- Think about the interests and knowledge of your audience. What are the obvious **entry points** for them? It might not be best to begin at the beginning. Begin with something that is compelling for your audience.
- Are there **examples** that illustrate your question, argument, or main point in a way that's easier to understand?
- If you stated your **main point** at the very beginning of the presentation, what would be missing for the audience? How will you fill them in over the course of the talk, so that when you restate the main point at the end, they nod along with satisfaction?
- **"Tell'em what you're gonna tell'em. Tell'em. Then tell'em what you told'em."** Where and how will you repeat critical points and "signpost" your argument?
- How will you tackle the background information or parts of the argument that you expect to be challenging for people outside your sub-field? How will you check in to make sure everyone is following?
- What is the **climax** of the talk?

- Which methodological details are relevant, and which are distracting? How will you pace the presentation of experimental methods?

Peer feedback opportunity: Goals and structure

One good stage to get feedback is after you've figured out your goals and drafted an outline of the talk. The more you've thought it through and written down your ideas, the more you'll benefit from feedback. The following are suggestions to guide the discussion.

1. **State the main point of your talk** (hopefully this is just a couple sentences). Ask your peers:
 - a. Is the main point intriguing, compelling, provocative? Or is it boring, irrelevant, pedantic, arcane?
 - b. What does that statement make them want to hear more about?
 - c. Does the main point sound important and worthwhile? Why or why not?
 - d. Do they see any relevance to their own work or their field? What associations do they make to their own field, which may or may not be intended/appropriate?
2. **Sketch out the steps of your argument or narrative**, including the background information, assumptions, hypotheses, evidence, and logical inferences. Ask your peers:
 - a. Is the starting point compelling for them? Do they want to hear more?
 - b. Are they familiar with the background literature or assumptions?
 - c. Does each step of the argument/narrative make sense?
 - d. Which parts seem familiar, and which are hardest to understand? (Do their responses match your expectations?)
 - e. Does the argument/narrative serve the main point?
 - f. Which parts seem unnecessary or irrelevant?
 - g. Did they catch any **jargon** that was unfamiliar?
3. **Discuss challenging content and disciplinary jargon in detail.**
 - a. Go through the challenging parts several times until your peers understand, and then work together to figure out how to explain it better.
 - b. What jargon gets in the way? When is it useful (rare, but possible)?
 - c. Keep an ear out for specialized uses of seemingly non-technical terms (e.g. "theoretical", "representation", "processing"), which can be interpreted differently in different disciplines.
 - d. How many new terms or concepts will the audience have to keep track of at once? Are they all necessary? How can you guide people through complex concepts?
 - e. Would an example help?
4. **Make a plan to check in with the audience at the challenging parts.**
 - a. How could you figure out whether the audience was following?

- b. If the audience were a class and you were the teacher, how would you make sure that they understood you?

Content: Creating a talk with slides

After getting feedback from your peers or an advisor, you may have totally changed your outline. Just make sure you *have* an outline before you begin filling in content. Having a clear goal and a structure that serves your goal is absolutely essential.

YOU are the presenter, not your slides.

- The visuals on the slides are there to help you explain concepts and clarify the structure of your argument.
- What is your goal for each slide? If you conveyed your point with no visuals at all, what (if anything) would be missing?
- Slides are NOT an outline of everything you say.
- Slides are NOT an opportunity to squeeze in more information that you don't have time to say.

AVOID JARGON.

Can't say this enough.

Plan for your allotted time

When a speaker says they "might not get to everything," it conveys that they didn't care to take the time to prioritize their goals and plan the talk carefully. You should care about getting your main point across--that's why you're giving the talk! Edit your slides ruthlessly: make sure every bit of content serves your goals. And **PRACTICE!** There's no way to know whether your talk will fit in the allotted time without practicing.

Style

Be in charge

Presenting a talk is a lot like being the teacher at the front of a class. You're the one with the plan, and you have more expertise on this particular topic than most of the audience. So it's your job to guide the whole room through the talk and the question period, making sure that the goals you had for the audience are accomplished.

- **Make your expectations for the audience clear.** It's YOUR choice whether you want to be interrupted with questions throughout your talk. If you say you don't care if people interrupt you

and you might not finish, that conveys that your conclusion isn't important, and you don't care very much whether you get your main point across. It's usually better to plan ahead for stopping points in your talk where you can pause for questions.

- **Check in actively with the audience.** You should be watching the audience for signs of comprehension or confusion (**make eye contact!**), but you should also ask them explicitly whether they're following. It's a good idea to plan out when in your talk you'll stop for questions, to make sure everyone is on the same page.
- **Don't read your slides or a script.** It's impossible to engage with the audience if you're reading. If you must have something written down to help you remember, do it in outline form (but not on the slide!), so that you only have to glance at it to know what to talk about next.
- **Manage audience questions with confidence.** It's up to you whether you get to the end of your presentation. If an audience member asks a non-essential question, don't hesitate to defer it to the question period.

Be inclusive

When you're very familiar with some members of the audience, it can be tempting to talk the way you would with them. You should be careful to avoid speaking in a way that implicitly conveys who in the audience is in the "in crowd" and who is not.

- **Avoid jargon!** This is really important. Nothing turns an audience off like jargon, particularly in the first few minutes of a talk. It conveys to listeners that this talk isn't for them.
- Some members of the audience are not familiar with the same researchers as you. It's almost never appropriate to refer to researchers by their first name only, even if they are students or faculty at UMD.
- Avoid saying "you all know this", or apologizing for saying things that may seem obvious. Chances are not everyone knows it. A clear explanation of something your peers and mentors already know will make them feel happy, not insulted or bored.
- When you introduce charts and tables, explain what type of information they display (e.g. "This axis is...") before talking about actual data they contain. As experts in our own field, we can get accustomed to seeing lots and lots of similar figures, leading us to forget that it's not obvious to others what the figures show.

Have fun!

If you convey your excitement about your research, the audience will feel interested and engaged too. This is your chance to share your ideas with a friendly and engaged audience. There is very little to lose and a lot to gain.

Peer feedback opportunity: Practice talk

Getting feedback on a practice talk will improve your presentation dramatically.

It's a good idea to number your slides to make it easier for listeners to jot down notes. Ask your audience to hold any questions or feedback so you can get through the entire talk on time.

Ask your test audience:

- What did you take the main point to be?
- Was the argument/narrative easy to follow? Where did you get lost, and why?
- When were you most/least engaged?
- Did any of the content seem expendable?
- What jargon should I remove or explain?
- Which slides were useful, and which were distracting?
- How did I come across as a presenter?

More resources/tips

You'll notice some common themes...

[Elsevier: How to give a dynamic scientific presentation](#)

[Ten Secrets to Giving a Good Scientific Talk](#)

[How *Not* to Give a Scientific Talk](#)

[The Art of Selling Science: Presenting an engaging scientific talk](#)

[How Experts Can Help a General Audience Understand Their Ideas](#)

[Crafting the Introduction to a Scientific Presentation: Create a mystery box](#)

