

# **Giving Good Talks**

## **Attending Conferences**

## **Most Graduate Students Hate Giving Talks**

- **Survey: Asked adults what they fear most:**
  1. Public speaking
  2. Death
- **Typical problems for graduate students:**
  - Unsure of material
  - Poor presentation skills
  - Thinking on your feet: What if someone asks me a question I don't know the answer to?
- **Best advice: give lots of talks! It does get better!!**

## **Why Should You Learn to Give Good Talks**

- **Essential skill for communicating ideas**
  - Can't have an impact if people don't hear about your ideas
  - Good ideas can get lost if poorly presented
- **Most people give rotten talks**
  - Great way to set yourself apart!
- **Where will you give talks?**
  - Conferences, workshops, research group meetings, area exam, proposal, defense

## **General Advice on Giving Good Talks**

- **Organize talk by time you want to spend on each topic**
  - 25-minute talk
  - 5 minutes on motivation, previous work
  - 5 minutes on background, design issues
  - 10 minutes on results
  - 5 minutes to summarize, discuss future work
- **Be realistic about how much you can present in the time allotted**
- **Practice and time yourself: most people take 2 to 3 minutes per slide (25 minute talk: 10-15)**
  - Some people 1 minute, some people 10 minutes

## **A Good Conference Talk Motivates People to Read Your Work**

- **Conference talk: limited time**
  - Can't present every graph in paper
  - Can't give people in-depth understanding
- **GOAL: generate enough interest so they will read your paper**
- **ALWAYS start with motivation: why should they care? why is the problem important?**
- Clearly state the issues and important results
- Relatively few graphs, good motivation, analysis, conclusions

## Practice, Practice, Practice

- Don't assume that others are naturally good speakers
- **Best speakers, best talks are well-practiced**
  - Rule of thumb: practice until you are sick of it
- **Best audience: fellow graduate students, advisor**
  - Also toughest audience
- Not so much part of the culture here at Georgia Tech
  - Make it part of your culture
- **Seek out criticism:**  
**painful, but the only way you improve**
- **Never had an audience outside that was half as tough as my practice talks in front of friends**

## How to Run a Practice Talk

- Reserve a conference room, ask people to come
- Allow two to three times the allotted time for the talk for the practice talk
- Bring food -- people are doing you a favor, giving up a lot of their time (cookies, crackers, drinks)
- **Print out copies of your transparencies (2 per page) so people can make notes while you talk**
  - Collect these at the end and pay close attention
- **Ask someone to time you on a slide-by-slide basis**
  - Helps you figure out where you are stumbling over your words

- **Give the talk straight through without stopping for questions**
  - Gives you accurate timing
- **Painful part: getting comments**
- Ask for overall comments
  - Do all the parts of the talk make sense?
  - Is the structure of the talk clear? Could it be improved?
  - Is the motivation clear?
  - Are the results well-supported?
  - Are there issues that the speaker hasn't thought about?
  - Are there mistakes? good technical check

- **Next: go through slides in order, taking comments**
- Anything is fair game: major to trivial
- **Typical comments:**
  - That slide is too cluttered
  - It's hard to figure out what you're talking about:  
can you put in a picture that shows that?
  - I followed your reasoning up to that third bullet  
and then you lost me
  - This slide doesn't make any sense at all--I think  
your idea here is just wrong
  - That sure is an ugly font/color/picture/
  - The axes on your graph are unreadable/cryptic
  - It would be better to skip this slide--it just  
distracts from the main flow of your talk

- **Typically: get so many comments that you basically re-write the talk from scratch**
  - Advantage: it will be a much better talk
  - Disadvantage: you might feel the need to do a second practice talk because the new talk is so different from the first one
- **A good idea: show the slides to one or a few people before your practice talk**
  - Talk it through
  - Have them point out any major logical/structural flaws so that you don't spend your whole practice talk focusing on them
- **Once you have revised your talk: practice, practice, practice!!**

## Good Slides

- **Not too cluttered**
- **Use phrases, not complete sentences**
- **Add space to separate out ideas**
  - Also use indentation to show structure visually
- **Use large fonts: at least 18 pt (my default is 22 pt)**
  - Enforces conciseness
- **Use bold for emphasis**
  - For large conferences, use all bold
- **Use color for emphasis**
  - Use color sparingly (at most 2 or 3 colors)

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## More on Good Slides

- “Picture is worth a thousand words”
- **Ideal: one picture or graph per slide**
  - Probably can’t achieve it, but try
  - Clarifies ideas, keeps talk visually interesting
- **Big mistake: assume picture tells the whole story**
- **If there is a point you want people to get, put it down in words on the slide!!!!**
- **Always, always, always put main points on slides**
  - Minds drift, people get distracted
  - Don’t assume people are hanging on every word
  - Make it possible to read slide and catch up

## More on Good Slides

- Don't cover slides and slowly reveal them
- Overlays can be effective, but practice, use them smoothly
- **Practice and have a sense of exactly how long your talk will be**
- If spending too long on particular slides, concentrate on exact wording so it will be smooth
  - Write it down if necessary
- **Be prepared to discard slides if people ask questions and the talk starts to go over time**

- **Label things well**
  - Graph axes
  - Graph lines
  - Don't use parameter names specified by your simulator (meanSimX, arrayNum)
- **People hate speakers who talk too long!**
  - Rude, unprofessional
  - Want a graceful way to cut down your time
- **May want to have extra slides**
- Short is ok!
- In a long talk: (1-hour tutorial) material to cover if you have fewer questions than expected

- **Predict questions and make slides to cover the answers**
  - After practice talk, should know a lot of the likely questions
  - Put some answers in your talk
  - Reserve others for question period

## Attending Conferences

- **Great way to learn**
- **Good way to make contacts**
  - Senior people vs. junior people
  - Ask for introductions to senior people
- **Intimidating to talk to senior people**
  - Today: junior people
  - Tomorrow: increasingly important contacts
- **Consider paying for your own conferences**
  - A wise investment