

Presenting your work with good design and confidence – transcript

Presenting your work at University can take many forms such as giving a presentation, designing a poster, or sharing your ideas on social media. Whatever option you take, making sure you present your information clearly both in your design choices and in how you communicate are both key to a successful presentation.

In this video, we will give you some top design tips that you can apply to most visual design situations to make sure your work is as inclusive and accessible as possible. We'll also give you some tips on how to present with confidence, especially if it your first time doing any form of public speaking. We've done a lot of it over the years, so this advice is based on lots of personal experiences.

Why might you want to present your work? And by present we mean something that isn't a formal article or dissertation – this is not the only mechanism by which you can share your science!

Presenting your work through something like a poster can be a great chance to share your ideas; you might be able to inspire others with your work as well as spark new ideas for them. It's a great opportunity to communicate what you do as well as honing your presentation skills. But most importantly, you get a chance to tell your own story. Science is very collaborative but that does also mean you're often writing and working with other people – sometimes something like a poster is a rare chance to tell your story in your own words and with your own style!

But before we get too ahead of ourselves, let's take a moment to think.

What's the best way of communicating your story? You could present your ideas as a poster, ranging from a simplified information guide style poster all the way through to a more information heavy conference poster. You could expand your information into a leaflet or something else that people can take away with them to absorb afterwards. Or you could add a story to a departmental website or even blog about it. Or you could record a podcast or make a YouTube video about it. You could post about it on TikTok or some other social media platform like Instagram. It might make more sense to present your work in context such as through a tour as part of a public engagement event. Or you can just have an informal meeting with interested folks. And perhaps a slightly more flippant example...could that meeting have been an email? All things to consider!

So now you know how you want to communicate your work, where do you start?

First of all, know your audience. Make sure your information is pitched to your audience. Are they your peers? Are they someone with no experience of your subject? How you answer these questions will influence what information you include and at what level of technicality or detail. Take some time to break down any technical jargon. We all have terms and acronyms that we work with every day, so much so that they become a second language and we often forget that others might have no idea what we're talking about.

To give you an example, these 3 questions are useful for building ideas for the content of your presentation.

- What is the thing you want to get across? If someone was to only remember one thing from your poster, what would you want it to be?

- How can you present your data – what is going to convey your point well? Do you need to build charts?
- Depending on how you're presenting your work, you might be able to include some highlights in a presentation or a poster and then provide a leaflet or link to more detail for people to explore later on.

You are telling your story so use the art of storytelling to your advantage. Make sure you have a beginning, a middle, and an end. This structure will not only help you plan but it'll make sure you don't lose your audience halfway through. To plan out your structure, use something quick and easy like sticky notes to plan out your key points and then shuffle them around to get the order you want.

So once you have an idea of how you want to pitch your work as well as what sorts of things you might want to include, you can now think about the actual content and layout. This will vary depending on what format you're using so we're going to give some general tips that should be applicable across many different media.

We tell people this about poster design all the time. They are an illustrated abstract...not a full manuscript. You are not going to be able to show every detail and aspect of your work on a poster. A poster should act as a summary of your work, much in the same way an abstract would for a manuscript. This is also a good tip to remember for when you're giving a presentation, summarising your work for a video, or pretty much anything else. Going into too much detail risks losing your audience and muddies what your key takeaway message is.

So in the spirit of keeping things simple, keep your text minimal. Too many words and it is going to look cramped and unreadable.

Another tip, especially if you're presenting some work. If people are reading your slides, they might not be listening to you. The brain can only do so much so keep your text to a minimum on your slides wherever possible.

Consider where your work is going to be displayed? This could be a physical poster but it could also be a digital presentation, social media post...either way, making sure you know where something will appear for your audience will ensure that you don't have anything going pixelated or warped.

Before you start any design, check that your canvas dimensions are correct – there's nothing more frustrating than needing to resize everything when you thought you were done!

An easy way to make sure things like a poster or slide are legible is to leave some blank space around the text. Without this your work will look very cramped and be harder to read.

Another way to represent ideas is via images – try to pick ones that will express your point well or will catch peoples attention. This can be stock images or really engaging images from your work.

When you are using images, make them big and beautiful! As you can see, we like to use big images, but if you do need to use more text you can use colour blocking or negative space to create interesting visual slides. I'm using PowerPoint today that has functionality in its newer versions to help with this.

Creative Commons is a licencing framework that lets people share stuff online for free with a few terms attached if they want, but it's mostly just crediting the creator. You can get CC0 images too which don't require any crediting. I'm a particular fan of Unsplash – everything on there is CC licenced, high resolution and searchable.

We've all seen it and it is a bit cringe so avoid doing this.

Keep your fonts consistent. Try not to use more than two fonts and make sure you use sans-serif fonts. Sans-serif literally means "without feet" so they don't have those little bottom bits which can actually make fonts hard to read. Good examples include Arial and Calibri, which is what we've used for our fonts in this video.

Avoid white backgrounds for paper, computer and visual aids. White can appear too dazzling. So use cream or a soft pastel colour.

Also, use bold for emphasis, rather than italics or underlining

If you are using text, try emphasising your main point with a complimentary colour to highlight it so people are drawn to it quickly. If you need a colour palette, trying using an online colour wheel to find complementary and accessible colours. Adobe Color is a handy tool for this and also shows what colours look like for those might see colour differently to you.

Look for flow of information; eye movement should be natural – down columns, along rows, or from larger to smaller. You can also use font size, arrows, pointing hands, numbers and letters to clarify a sequence. For example with posters, don't assume that everyone will read your poster from left to right. This is a Western approach so include guidance to make your poster as accessible as possible.

And don't forget those final checks - Use Adobe Color to check your visual accessibility and use inbuilt accessibility checkers in tools like PowerPoint to check text, layout and reading order

A quick note about presenting data. Think about the best way to display your data. Is it text? Is it a graph?

First of all, Excel is not presentation software. Let's just get that out of the way first. It can create graphs and other things for presentation purposes but never ever show a spreadsheet as a slide. Ever. It's akin to the reading text out to people who are listening to you. They won't see the cells, they don't want to see the cells, stop showing them your cells already.

Remember, unless you're prepping your data for publication, you are not delivering an article. Your audience are not taking the time, or necessarily have the inclination to take the time, to read your careful labels and really detailed statistics. You need to strip things down to key points for a presentation. While you may have a bit of time to talk through the detail, people aren't going to be able to read everything from the audience so just focus on the top highlights.

There are lots of tips and tricks that I could share about presenting data, but it would take up another hour of time so instead I'm going to recommend this book. Its 2nd edition was released in 2017 and it really is quite good so do grab yourself a copy.

There's many times when you'll have to actually talk to people...other human beings...about your work. I know, horrifying! In this last section, I'm going to share some tips from my own experience of teaching and presenting. They might not all work for you, but keep an open mind.

Honing your key message down can be tricky, especially if you only have about 5 or so minutes to present some complex ideas. In cases like these it is good to have an elevator pitch. An elevator pitch comes from the world of business and is a short, succinct summary of your project or idea. The aim is, you're in an elevator or a lift, with someone you want to talk to and you have the duration of the elevator or lift ride up to the top floor, how do you pitch your idea to that person in a very short space of time?

So the key message for an elevator pitch is to never undersell yourself.

1. Identify your goal – so what do you want to persuade people to do with this pitch? Much like key message in your presentation, the content of your pitch should be geared towards this.
2. Explain what you do – what do you want the person to remember most about you? Describe what you do in ways that make it sound exciting.
3. Communicate your USP, that's getting very business now, or your unique selling point – what is the one thing you can offer that no one else can – or perhaps why is your research particularly interesting?
4. Engage with a question – follow up with an open ended question e.g. – what is your experience with the lab technique I used? And it continues on the conversation.

This is a really good exercise for honing down your key message but it is also a good skill to practice for when you're at conferences or other events where you might just have a moment or two over coffee to talk to someone about what you do. It's also a great chance to practice being concise at interviews.

So who gets nervous before a presentation? Are you nervous about one that you have to do? Spoiler alert: I do get nervous before presentations.

It's ok. Everything will be fine and everyone gets nervous, it's completely normal. You can help yourself by being prepared (so no last minute slide changes unless you really have to), taking some time to relax even if that means taking ten seconds to breathe before starting, and if it's the first time you're presenting these slides maybe get a willing victim to practice on. That will help you work through the presentation and get some feedback before going public. Also, the audience isn't out to trick you. They want to hear what you have to say so, go for it!

Think about your body language. You might be terrified inside but try not to show it on the outside. Don't fold your arms as this can be read as a defensive position and will close you off to yourself audience, whether you mean to or not. If you're presenting from a podium, you can use it to hide your shaking knees to start with but don't be afraid to move around either. If you can, try to identify some good allies in the audience who are either smiling encouragingly or who have something snazzy that catches your eye – cool hair, shiny jewellery...keep coming back to them as you glance around the room in your presentation. You might be looking through them but they give you key anchor points in the audience to keep up that eye contact and engagement.

Would you be comfortable presenting without a script? Now this is entirely a personal choice but it comes back to that eye contact and engagement with your audience. If you are buried in your notes and don't look up at all then you've potentially lost your audience before you've even begun. You can have notes on your slides and see them in presenter mode and other things to help but I would recommend that you try to present without a script, or even notes, wherever you can. That way your speech is more free and you are able to use your hands to gesture and be more natural when presenting. It is scary but you can do it with practice and a good knowledge of your subject matter.

Keep a steady pace throughout your presentation. Nerves might make you want to rush but try to resist that urge. Speak clearly and try not to mumble if possible. Think about your volume. If you have a microphone then excellent but make sure you speak up and also don't shout! Just speak normally and if you notice people straining to hear, remind yourself to speak up. And apart from

anything else, breathe! It is so easy to rattle off a presentation and not take a breath at all. Don't do that. Passing out on stage is never a good look.

So you've finished your presentation but you can't run away just yet, there's still the risk of questions!

Sometimes people don't ask questions and that's ok. But they often do. When presented with a question, take a beat. Don't launch straight into your answer. Repeat the question back. This is helpful for people who might not have heard the speaker and it also gives you a chance to confirm that you understand what they've asked, especially if it's one of those rambling questions...we've all heard them. It is ok to say I don't know sometimes. You might not know but you can always follow up with the person afterwards or share your answer on social media. Depending on where you are, it can be helpful to open the question up to anyone else in the audience. We all have different experiences and expertise and others might be able to offer their take on things.

But what if it all goes wrong? Well it depends on your definition of wrong.

Tech failures happen to us all and you can help yourself with things like saving your PowerPoint as a PDF so you don't lose any of the editing or fonts that you've used. Opening a presentation on a new PC is a terrifying thing and if you can't present from the same laptop that you created your presentation on, always save a PDF backup. Always.

If you need to give a live demonstration of a tool, get screengrabs lined up just in case. I've had to demonstrate a tool without an internet connection which means it didn't work. I've had websites go down for maintenance or the entire University having access blocked to a service on the same afternoon that I needed to demonstrate it to around 300 students. Stuff happens but you can prepare for the emergency that hopefully won't actually happen.

You might have an epic tech fail and have to present without slides. This might happen and it has happened to me on a fair few times and this is where being prepared comes in really useful and not relying on your slides to push lots of information at people. Have a copy of your slides with you so you can at least use them as a reminder of what you meant to talk about.

Or you might worry about flubbing your presentation or forgetting to say something. Don't. Worry. You might know what you meant to say or do but your audience doesn't and if something does go wrong with your presentation, I can almost guarantee you that they probably won't notice because they didn't know to expect that cat picture to appear at that precise moment that it didn't. Just ride through it and keep going.

So, I hope this presentation has inspired you. Here are some concluding points.

Keep it simple: remember things like your poster are just an abstract, not a full paper so treat it as such.

Make it accessible: use fonts, colour, sizes and layout strategically.

Use images and graphics: get some engaging visuals in there to draw people in.

Pitch it at the right level: make sure you explain things in the right way for whatever audience will be looking at your work. Also, prepare to speak briefly and quickly about your work to lots of people in a short space of time so hone your message.

Tell your own story: all through academia you'll find yourself co-writing papers and sharing your research with others. Presenting in alternative formats is often a great opportunity to do this but do it in your own way and with your own words.