

CME

Common errors made during presentation of papers at conferences.

Vihang Mazumdar, Professor and Head, Department of PSM, Medical College Baroda

Correspondence to Dr. Vihang, email id: vihang.mazumdar@gmail.com

The purpose of presenting a paper at a conference is to showcase your research work and trying, in the process, to communicate its importance, clearly stating what you have found, concluded and hopefully to provoke the interest of audience to ask you questions, clarifications and sometimes give you an important feedback. You get good inputs from teachers from the other colleges as well which has to be taken in a very positive way. It is not a comment for your ability neither is it a comment on the ability of your teachers. It is a different perspective which has to be taken, of having additional view point on something. It is only an additional viewpoint which you are free to accept or reject. The components of a presentation are: a title, introduction, background, research question, aim/s and objective/s, research methodology in brief and results, conclusion/s you have come to, recommendation/s which you propose, give references and finally an acknowledgement of all the people who have contributed to your study. These are standard components of any presentation. This is true for even a research paper for publication.

Title Slide:

It should contain the title of research which should be the same as what you had sent with the abstract. Sometimes abstract and the final presentation have different title and content. Mention your name and faculty. Mention the name of the PG guide /co author, faculty, and name of department and location of your institute. The title must be in fewest possible words which can clearly describe the research work. That means, your title must give an idea to the audience what to expect.

Sometimes, the title almost reads like the aim of the study, which it is not. Neither should it be too short otherwise it sounds more like a title of a textbook. “Malaria in Gujarat” can be a textbook title. It has to describe what you have studied about malaria. It should have independent variable, dependant variable and relationship which has been studied or presented in research. May be in term of context of place, study area can be added.

Introduction:

It is the background of the presentation. It's like a trailer of the study. It gives an idea to audience what they should expect in presentation, why this paper is important and the research unique and different. If similar study is done at several places there is no point of doing that research at all unless there are compelling scientific reasons for the disease to be different in your area. So, every presentation assumes that you are presenting something new, which was not known earlier or which was not understood earlier or you are presenting a different perspective of a disease which was not seen earlier. Ultimately, it must be reflected in your research question/s. Therefore, you start with background information of what is already known about the topic and you end with saying that with this background your study is tries to answer the question, which is not available in the literature or what has been reviewed by you.

Give the audience a context of what impact it would have. Start with broad idea, may be the definition of disease the context of the background knowledge about disease and narrow down in the end to say that what is unique about

the study and so what is the importance of studying that aspect of this disease.

Aim and Objectives:

There is a lot of confusion between aim and objective. They are said in same breath and practically as synonyms, but they are not. Aim is the overall statement of the nature of original research and one intends to do but the objectives are specific questions that one expects to answer in the research. What is the difference? Aim is overall statement but a good research being designed for and presented in a conference, cannot have more than one or if related may be 2 objectives. It cannot have 5 objectives. A common mistake many students make when they present something from their thesis at conferences. The entire aim and objectives are those of the thesis. In the thesis you could have 5 objectives because you are studying in greater depth and doing it over long period of time and presenting it over 50 to 100 pages.

Methodology:

It describes what the study design was and how it was conducted. It should give enough information on how data was collected and analysed. What software was used? The purpose of methodology is to allow audience to judge validity. That means, is the methodology is correct for the research question asked or the objective/s? Ideally, methodology should be able to convey enough information to a person to be able to replicate the study; sometimes conference format does not allow us to present all details.

The content would be what was the study design, participant group, how informed consent was taken. If more than one group, what was the method of assignment to groups and what was the intervention, what was the design to implement that intervention and provide information of the two groups i.e. control arm and test arm?

How the dependant variable was measured and what was the planned comparison. Many times it happens that we start with some concept and during the study we find out that it is not turning out the way it was expected. You are not getting participants and suddenly study design changes half way. We make sure of congruence between methodology and result. We also do not go to great lengths to describe commonly used methods- just mention name.

Results:

Each of your tables must follow the logical sequence as laid down in your aim and objectives. A presentation can have only few tables when you are working with a single objective. One could be basic description and demographics, and if you have done cross tabulation or subgroup analyses then there may be additional tables and all of them relate to an objective because you cannot have tables and not have an objective for that. In fact, when you write a research proposal you must make dummy tables and identify to which objective it would relate to. Also, if you are looking at an objective then what are data you would require for analyses to conclude what your objective wants you to conclude and therefore you must start from the end. I will have to do a particular statistical analysis and for which I will need particular data and which I will get from this particular table; and to generate this particular table I need data field/s in my pro forma. So, it always reverse, we don't make pro forma first and then think about the table later.

Discussion:

A common mistake people make in discussion is describing tables in words. Discussion is what you want to say about the research you have done. These are *your* findings. Results are what *you* have found. What you have to try to convey in discussion is- *so what!* Why is it important? How does it compare with

previous data or other studies and how my research is different from the others? Your discussion should give *your* interpretation of *your* data. Did you find something you did not expect? Your idea is to keep audience interested in what you saying. The discussion is basically presenting your principle finding/s with scientific arguments.

Scientific argument does not mean that nobody can challenge it. It is based on your logic and your knowledge. It is up to somebody else to challenge it, just as your research challenges previous knowledge on the topic, which is what research is all about.

Conclusion:

It summarises the results of research. It should be very precise and defined. That means, you cannot conclude anything which is not part of your objective/s and methodology proposed to find. If you have not included some population groups then you cannot conclude anything about them.

You have done a study in your OPD and you draw conclusions about prevalence of a disease in the city in which your hospital is – is another example. So basically, your conclusion must answer, your objectives, your research questions which you have raised.

Recommendation:

This is most important; your recommendation can not introduce new ideas but rely only on evidence. Recommendations are only possible in an interventional study. But your recommendation can be- your descriptive study shows that there are factor/s associated and propose further research to be done in that area to conclude whether these factor are really responsible or not. Most common mistake is to make a recommendation on a factor which is never part of your research. For example, in a descriptive study on prevalence of malnutrition among slum children, we say that we found that malnutrition was very

common in slum children that we studied and our recommendation is we should increase health education of all women and teach them IYCF or we should increase the quantity of supplementary nutrition. You have not studied this in your research. How can you say that health education will make difference? Unless you actually study health education as intervention- that initially we did a research we found so many malnourished children. Half of them were considered as controls and they were allowed to get education from anganwadi worker and in the other group we got the mothers together and gave them education and then we concluded that health education made a difference for the better. Then you can say that health education is recommended to be given to mothers. You cannot make sweeping statements. Most of recommendations you see in conferences- that poverty should be reduced, education should be increased, and female literacy should be increased! You have not studied these factors in your research at all but you are making a sweeping statement. We must be very careful in making recommendations. You cannot advice people to do this or that without studying what are the outcomes or impact of that particular intervention. It can have ideas for further research or studies can be advocated.

References:

Many people do not clearly understand the different between reference and bibliography. Reference refers to all articles, books, internet sites which you have used in your research and have cited somewhere in the text. Bibliography refers to all the articles, books, journal, literature which you referred to improve your knowledge of subject. So, if you want audience to have a better understanding of subject or topic then you may use bibliography. For example I read textbook of PARK or HARRISON but if I have not quoted Harrison in my presentation then I don't use Harrison in my reference list but

Harrison is my background search which I have done on that topic therefore Harrison becomes part of my bibliography.

It is a very important aspect of research that there is no shame in saying that I started with a research question but that it turned out to be not fruitful. The favour you are doing others by presenting that is, at least others may not make the same mistake

Lots of research done by students does not have much time and money spent, therefore, most of the research have some limitations which need to be mentioned. Otherwise, audience concludes what you have not included as a methodological lapse. For example, you have not mentioned non inclusion tribal population as a limitation. The audience will realise that the study does not contain anything about tribal population and may consider it as a sampling mistake. If they feel that the findings could be different in tribal population they are most welcome to study it in tribal population and compare the results with your study.

Presentation techniques:

You often prepare slides that allow you to read out entire presentation from the power point which is absolutely wrong. Your presentation should not contain every single word you are going to speak while making the presentation. Your slides should only have bullet points. If you cannot remember, please write on a paper what you wish to speak in every slide or memorize it. If you do not, half the time people look at the screen and not at your face. Preferably, add only one bullet point at a time on your slide so that focus of the audience remains on single point which are you speaking about, otherwise they read ahead of you when you are speaking about previous point .

Use a good font size that is legible to someone at the back of the hall. Main point and sub point have to be different font size. If you use complicated font, it looks good on the computer screen but not

at the time of presentation. When choosing colours of fonts, make sure that they make good contrast with background. These are only pointers. You have to make your own choice and it comes with experience, looking and attending more presentations to get more idea about what looks good. While attending conferences, always pay attention to these details and not to the content of the presentation alone.

Each presenter must present in a way that topic belongs to him/her-someone who is very comfortable with the topic; a person who has done the research and knows the subject and the presentation. Practice for timing, for way you speak, for pronunciation, for English and even if you have to, practice in front of the mirror to see how you look when you make the presentation. Be enthusiastic about the research which you have done. Do not make it look as if you are presenting a paper because that was the only way to get permission to attend the conference Make eye contact with your audience.

Questions:

How do you deal with questions? If you have the answer please share the answer with the audience, if you don't, then don't bluff. Be honest- I actually don't know the answer to that, but I will try and try to find the answer and get back to you" or if your guide is present say "I request Dr XYZ to help answer this question or you may say could we discuss this after presentation is over because I can't explain it in two minutes which I have.I always say that research is like cooking. No amount of reading books can replace doing it yourself and learning from your mistakes. I have written this article from the presentation I made at Booster 2014 on a request. I hope that I have added to your knowledge with what I have learnt from my teachers over the years and continue to do so from my peers and *students...*