Giving a Seminar Talk

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1. Introduction

Being able to give a seminar talk is an important part of being a professional. The types of seminars you may be required to give may be varied. As a graduate student you may be called upon to give a seminar on your current research. In defending your PhD thesis you will be expected to give a seminar to an examining committee and audience on the subject matter of your thesis. Perhaps later you will need to present yourself for Habilitation and again a seminar will be expected of you, indeed usually a public seminar to commence the process and then for the final stage of the habilitation process. On other occasions you may be asked to give a research seminar at any stage in your career and in some cases in different institutions. While in some respects every situation is different there can be substantial similarities. Some of the material given here follows that in "*Conference Presentations*". Giving a seminar is a very personal matter and different people will (fortunately) have different styles and there are few hard and fast rules. These notes are offered only as a guide. It's over to you!

Time Allocation

In most cases you will be allocated a time not exceeding one hour. Of that time you should allow ten minutes for questions. This leaves you with 50 minutes in which to make your presentation. Remember audiences become restive if you exceed your allocated time. Better to finish before your time is up rather than exhaust the patience of the audience.

Before the seminar

You will be expected to supply a title for your seminar and possibly an abstract. The title should be descriptive and involve not more than ten to twelve words. You should give this to the seminar organiser well in advance together with how you want your name listed in the announcement. If an abstract is required consult the "*Conference Presentations*" notes. Giving a seminar can be a demanding task and upon its success or failure may hang your future. Do not leave preparation too close to the time of giving the presentation. If you are a student then make sure you discuss with your supervisor the material you plan to present. You may well seek his/her advice on the materials you have prepared for the seminar. Expect to be nervous before the start of the seminar - that is normal even for experienced speakers. While in New Zealand Richard Feynman confessed to nervousness prior to giving lectures - Dirac was notorius for nervousness - so you are in good company. Good preparation is the key to giving a good seminar. A tidy confident personal presentation is advisable. You want to make a good impression. Practice giving your seminar in either an empty room or with a few friends. Remember reading out a seminar talk usually takes much less time than at the actual presentation.

Advice for Second Language Presentations

Giving a seminar in other than your native language poses additional problems and stresses. Write out your talk in some detail and most particularly prepare overhead transparencies with the main points indicated in the appropriate language. This gives you something to fall back on and aids self-confidence. Use a spell checker, if available. If in doubt consult a dictionary. If you have access to UNIX use the "look" command to check spellings. For example, should it be "ocasion", "occasion" or "occassion". Try "look oca", then "look occa" and see what happens. Talk slowly and loudly - you want the person in the back of the room to hear you and to stay awake! While talking look around at the audience you may be able to gauge their reaction to your talk and make modifications to your presentation as you proceed. Looks of profound puzzlement may indicate that you are not explaining things clearly.Don't deliver your presentation pacing backwards and forwards - the audience is not attending a tennis match. An element of light humour can help but don't overdo it and certainly resist offending members of the audience. Avoid nervous mannerisms such as rattling coins or keys in your pockets.

NEVER apologise for your lack of language skill - the audience is sympathetic to your difficulties and is usually very forgiving.

Most of the above advice holds equally well for native speakers!

Level of Presentation

In most cases the audience will not be specialists in the field of your topic. You should try to reach the general audience and not just the specialist sitting in the front row. Everyone in the audience should be able to derive some benefit from attending your seminar. This is not an occasion to be obscure and to impress the audience with your brilliance by being incomprehensible. This is not the occasion to impress your audience with a continuous flow of complex equations. Use equations sparingly, most of the audience will be lost to you. The audience wants to hear what has been the principal objectives of your work and what have you achieved. Emphasise results you have obtained and their significance. Experimentalists should avoid the temptation to impress with a succession of detailed drawings of complex experimental equipment.

Organisation of your Seminar

You should count on spending about ten minutes introducing the subject of your seminar. Everyone in the audience should be able to understand the content of the introduction. You might list on your opening transparency the main sections of your seminar to indicate the flow of your talk. After the introduction the audience should be ready for the main part of your seminar. Great technical detail is not required - rather try to summarise in words and diagrams the main content of your work always trying to keep the audience in mind. Allow a few minutes towards the end of your talk to summarise your achievements - don't be so modest as to obscure from the audience your achievements - the audience wants to know! You might also indicate the direction you feel future work on your subject should take. Don't forget to acknowledge assistance received from others and the names of collaborators. Now for questions!

Question Time

In some cases audiences will ask questions throughout the talk and in other cases at the end of the talk. Be prepared for both possibilities. Questions during the talk are usually directed at clarification. Sometimes you will encounter a persistent questioner who seems more concerned with displaying his/her superior knowledge than seeking answers- don't be put off. Handle questions calmly and never agressively or abusively. Don't lose your cool! Answer your questions honestly - if you don't know the answer say so - don't try to bluff your way out. Don't get bogged down with one question. Suggest that it might be better to take up the question at a later time. In some cases it might be better to reply to a question "I will be coming to that point shortly", provided that is indeed the case! In other cases you might wish to refer the question to some other member of the audience "I think Dr. Enoon might be better able to answer your question". Remember, even the learned professors in the audience don't know everything!

Preparing Transparencies

Remember, you want the person at the back of the room to be able to read the information on your transparencies so make sure THE TYPE IS BIG! On plain TEXset the magnification to at *least* magstep 3 and similarly in LaTeX. Don't produce transparencies crowded with many lines of information - simply emphasise the main points. If your transparency has more than about fifteen lines then it is probably too dense. Graphical presentations are preferable to densely packed tables. A few clearly drawn diagrams can often convey more information than a whole series of equations. If you wish make use of modern computer packages to prepare drawings. If you cannot write in a clearly legible style then it is better to use TeX or LaTeX. Poorly prepared transparencies make for restive audiences and give a poor impression of you.

Some colour can add life to transparencies but make sure you use strongly contrasting colours especially as a significant portion of the males in the audience will have trouble with reds and greens.Don't overdo the number of transparencies. The audience sees time running out and you still have a stack of a further twenty transparencies. Enough is enough!

A final word to supervisors

Your student is giving a seminar. You of course could do better and may be squirming in your seat as your student makes mistakes, is inarticulate etc. Resist the temptation to assist - this is part of the student's learning experience. This is the student's ordeal NOT yours. You are not on trial. You should not dominate the seminar. In exceptional circumstances you may come to the rescue of your student by a *brief* supportive comment.

A final word to students

Giving your first seminar can be an ordeal. We have all gone through this experience and most of us have survived. Good preparation is the best way of avoiding problems. Regard your first seminar as a learning experience and don't be depressed if the outcome is not as good as you had hoped. The next one will be better!

A final word to listeners

If there is something worrying you ask a relevant question but refrain from having conversations with others in the audience. This can be very off putting for the speaker and indeed the rest of the audience. Don't be shy in asking questions - even "dumb" questions - they are often the ones that are worrying others in the audience. A good speaker will pick up a dumb question sympathetically and give an interesting and informative reply. If he/she doesn't and makes the sincere questioner look dumb, the speaker has shown up nobody but himself. Never ask a question simply to embarrass the speaker or to show off your superior knowledge. If you liked the seminar why not say so to the speaker. If you didn't like it or felt there was room for improvement perhaps you could make a quiet private sympathetic comment to the speaker.