Secrets for Successful Slides

*Nathan Schneider, 27 December 2018. License: *

Use these rules of thumb to make better slides for oral presentations.

1. Minimize text

Bad: filling the slides with paragraphs, equations, and huge tables. This treats the slides like a paper; there's no way the audience can read all that text while listening to what you're saying.

Good: short bullet points, concise tables.

Better: images (photos/clipart, charts/diagrams) to capture the ideas succinctly so the audience can focus on what you're saying.

2. Lead with an example

Put the concrete explanation before the abstract explanation. If your talk is about a linguistic phenomenon or an NLP task, the best way to convey that is usually to give an *example sentence* that illustrates what you're trying to achieve or argue.

You may want to use a running example throughout the talk to demonstrate your method.

3. Sync visual information with what you're saying verbally

If your slide consists of more than a sentence or 3 bullet points, it is probably too much for the audience to take in all at once. Build in (animate) pieces of the slide step by step to direct the viewer's attention. If you have a complicated figure (such as a chart or table with many parts), build in or graphically highlight different pieces of it as you go.

4. Emphasize key points

State the main ideas upfront and reiterate them throughout the talk.

You probably do not have time to present every last detail of a project. If it is a conference presentation, think of it as an advertisement for the paper.

Don't expect all viewers to process all the slides (they may be tired or distracted). What is the one slide you want the audience to remember from your talk after they've seen a dozen others? Chances are a good visual will be more memorable than a bunch of text (see #1).

5. Know your audience

Who is in your audience: experts in your specific topic? Field/subfield? Related fields? Members of the public? You need to explain background ideas and jargon they won't already know, while minimizing the time spent on things they do know already.

6. Practice and get feedback

The process of preparing talks matters! Your slides and verbal delivery will improve each time you practice, and a practice audience will help you debug points of confusion.