

Some suggestions for novice AERE presenters  
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Well Before the Conference

Be sure you are clear on what presentation media will be available. Almost all conferences now provide projectors and screens, but somebody needs to have a laptop (usually the session chair) and that one laptop should have all of the talks and discussant's slides loaded on it in advance of the beginning of the session—preferably WELL before the session, not just five minutes before—so that all of the talks can be queued in the correct order for quick transitions between speakers.

Remember that fonts can differ across computers, unless you have been careful to embed them in your document. Without this step, all of your “betas” might show up at the conference as “thumbs down” icons, or something like that. Sometimes it is safer just to write your PowerPoint slides to a .pdf file and to display the .pdf (using ctrl-L to toggle to full-screen mode). If you use Beamer, your display document will already be in .pdf format.

Scout the Room

If possible, locate the room where your session will be held and look inside it before your session, either the day before or earlier that day, so you have some confidence about what the room will look like and what its capacity might be. Assuming the room is already set up the way it will be for your session, try out the podium for height and learn whether the speakers will be seated at a draped table in the front of the room (typical) or whether you will need to get there soon enough for your session to be able to stake out a good spot in the first row of chairs (if there is no table for speakers). If you need any special accommodations compared to other people, be sure that your session chair knows about this in advance, so the two of you can figure out how to accommodate your needs without creating unnecessary inconveniences for the other speakers.

Be sure your session chair has received your slides and that you have a back-up thumb drive with the same slides on it with you, just in case. Get to the meeting room early enough to allow you a chance to practice briefly with the technology before your session. Ask to try out the presentation laptop or remote slide-changer (if there is one) so you know which buttons do what. If there is a laser pointer in the remote, be sure you can operate it without having to ask for instructions. Likewise with the microphone. If there is a fixed microphone on the podium, make sure it adjusts easily to a height that is right for you. Don't just say “That's OK, I don't need a microphone.” The air conditioning in many hotel meeting rooms makes it almost impossible for even strong speakers to make themselves heard all the way to the back of the room. Remember not to keep talking as you turn your head away from the mike to look at the screen, or people will hear only parts of your sentences. If it is a clip-on wireless mike, figure out just where you will clip the microphone and where you will carry the palm-sized transmitter to which it is usually attached. Folks with suits and pockets can often just put the transmitter unit in their jacket pocket. If you have no pockets, sometimes it will clip onto a waistband. It is good to figure out your strategy before the clock is ticking on your presentation time.

Make sure your visuals are easily seen. Figure out where to stand so that you are not between any audience member and the screen, and definitely make sure that you are not standing in front of the projector. (The light can be very hard on your eyes, and most presenters' faces and bodies make very poor projection screens.) Use a laser-pointer if possible, rather than standing in front of the screen and pointing at things with your hand. If your hands are really shaking, try "circling" the points you want to emphasize, rather than attempting to keep your hand steady enough to hold the laser dot on just a single point on the screen.

### Consider Your Audience

In a standard four-paper session at an academic conference in a hotel, your presentation will typically be delivered in a room that holds approximately 25-50 people, all of whom elected to attend your session rather than any other "concurrent" session that is going on at the same time. It is safe to assume that the majority of the people in your audience will be specifically interested in at least some of the papers included in your session. All the same, keep in mind that the importance of your particular paper's topic may not be as self-evident to your audience as it has become for you. Practice your talk on another Ph.D.-level economist who hasn't already read your paper, just to make sure that your introduction helps your audience "get" why your work is important and worth their attention. You cannot assume that anyone sitting in the audience (other than your discussant) has read your entire paper in advance, although one or two people might have.

### You Are NOT Presenting Your Entire Paper in 15-20 Minutes

So don't try. It is much harder to describe your research in a short talk than in a standard 90-minute department seminar. Be very selective about what you choose to discuss. It should be clear and memorable, and you should not have to talk a mile a minute to get through your choice of material. Your talk is like an extended "trailer" for the full-length movie that is your paper. You want to talk about the best "scenes," but you don't have time for a lot of "character development." You want people to appreciate the nature of your specific innovations, and to understand roughly where your work fits into the existing literature. Your slides can mention in passing some of the other impressive or interesting things that your full paper covers, but you will have to be very selective about what to feature in your very scarce presentation interval.

### To Achieve a Smooth and Confident Delivery of your Talk

Practice, practice, practice in advance. Try delivering it out loud in front of a mirror, but also in front of real people, including both your peers and if possible, somebody with more substantial experience (your dissertation advisor, or other faculty in your general field...or even somebody outside your field who can push you to broaden your talk to appeal to the widest possible economist audience). Ask them for their feedback on both the substance of your talk and your delivery. If you have time, and you have (or can borrow) a video camera, tape yourself and take particular note of whether there is anything distracting about your delivery that makes you look unnecessarily nervous or otherwise detracts from your message. (For example, I know I tend to pace or rock back and forth until I get warmed up.) If you have not yet been trained by several terms of teaching evaluations to fix any of your speaking idiosyncracies, here are a few common problems for novice presenters

- a. Don't turn every statement into a question by allowing your voice to rise at the end of each sentence. If you remember movies from the 1980's, this is "Valley Girl"-speak. If you want an example of a public speaker who somehow manages to seem confident and definite about every statement, just listen to President Obama for a few minutes. Almost every one of his sentences goes down in tone at the end, or at the very least stays level. These speech patterns do a great job of assuring your audience that you are an authority on the subject.
- b. Some people "pronounce the periods" when they talk by using the question: "OK?" Don't do this, OK? You should not leave the impression that you are asking the audience whether they agree with, or approve of, each thing you say, OK? You are telling them about new knowledge you have created, OK? They will be confident in your authority on the subject if you sound confident about it, OK?
- c. Some people also "pronounce the bullet points" on their slides using "Um..." Don't do this either.

### Time-keeping

Also, your session chair will enforce the time limits, and it is better to err by finishing a minute early rather than running a minute late. Your chair will have some way to signal you as your time starts to run out. These may be hand signals, or they may be 8.5x11" sheets of paper with the number of minutes you have left written on them (preferably in large dark fonts, but sometimes just scrawled in pen). Be sure you keep an eye on these 5-minute, 2-minute, and/or 1-minute warnings, and adjust your presentation so you can come in with a "soft landing" at the end of your allotted time. Going blithely past your time limit while the chair is frantically trying to attract your attention is very poor form.

### The One-Slide-Per-Minute Rule

It is sometimes recommended that you should create no more than 15-20 slides for a 15-20-minute presentation. There will be deviations from this rule, depending upon what is on the slides, of course. If you have 40 slides for a 15-20 minute talk, you need to reconsider how much you are writing on them, or how much you are trying to cover in a very short time.

### Slide Junk

If you are new to presentation software, you may be tempted to use some of the built-in animations, where your words swoop onto the screen, or granulate in. These special effects usually irritate economics audiences, rather than impressing them. If you must use a background for your PowerPoint slides, pick a simple and unobtrusive one that doesn't argue with the text you are trying to display in your slides.

Economists have not traditionally used photographs in their slides for conference presentations, but you may have one that is relevant to the subject matter of your talk that can decorate your opening slide (which should also have your paper title and the name and affiliation information). Another one might serve as the final slide, but remember that these visuals should be selected to *enhance* what people remember about the substance of your talk, not detract from it. Everything you show the audience has an opportunity cost, given the time and attention-span constraints that you face in a presentation.

Make sure that any graphs you show are large enough for people to read the labels on the axes. Sometimes this will not work with a graph you have merely cut and pasted from your paper. You may need to build the graph again and increase the font-sizes for slide display.

#### If you Must Show Equations or Tables of Results...

If you cannot provide a synopsis of your research without resorting to detailed equations or tables, you should consider bringing handouts. A hundred tiny numbers on the screen is a waste of a slide. Presenters who do this also have to waste words by saying “Now I know you cannot read all these tiny numbers.” If you know this in advance, why would you try to show people these tiny numbers?

It is generally much better if you can figure out how to show *just the most important* “selected coefficients” from your tables of results and describe in words the other categories of estimates. Suppress t-test values and just use asterisks for significance. Maximize information per character on your slides. Explain that people can find the other details in the paper if they are interested.

#### As You Begin Speaking....

If you haven't done this very often, here's where the butterflies-in-the-stomach and the dry mouth problem will be at their worst. It is a built-in “fight or flight” response. (Try not to act on the “flight” option....and I've only seen one young speaker actually pass out at the podium.) If you are scheduled to be first in your session, it is sometimes a good idea to strike up a conversation with somebody during the minutes leading up to your presentation, and to talk about something entirely different, rather than to stew by yourself. However, going first can be better than having to wait until the end and have your anxiety level grow. Approach the podium with an air of confidence.

Life can be a bit easier if the sessions have been scheduled so that each person first discusses the paper that comes before their own. That way, you can get warmed up before you have to start talking about your own material.

#### Delivery That Engages Your Audience

1. Never talk about “my dissertation” even if the paper you are presenting is part of your dissertation. Refer to the material as “my current research” or “our research.” Don't talk to your research advisor as “my advisor.” Instead, refer to this individual as your “colleague” or your “collaborator” (unless this person clearly expects you to do otherwise). Take your cues from the other presenters, but for most AERE conference sessions, you may refer to someone by their first name after you have been introduced. As a presenter, you are on an equal footing with other presenters, no matter how junior you may be. Nobel Prize winners and emeritus professors may expect to be addressed as “Professor So-and-so,” but this deference usually isn't expected by ordinary people after you have properly made their acquaintance. Conduct yourself as though you are already an assistant professor (but of course don't misrepresent yourself if you are asked).

2. Establish eye contact with different individuals in your audience as you go through your material. Some of the best presenters seem to deliver each sentence or two to a different randomly selected specific person in the audience. Don't just stare at your notes or peer at the back wall of the room through your entire presentation.
3. Speak at a rate that is easy for each audience member to follow, and enunciate clearly. If English is not your native language, be sure to ask your practice audience (which should contain some native English speakers) to be candid about any systematic mispronunciations, especially for terms which are important in your paper. (I remember once puzzling for half a talk about what "the fissable origin" might be. Then I realized it was "the feasible region." An ah-hah moment!)
4. Speak with clarity and appropriate volume so that the entire audience can hear you. This can be hard to do in a room with a lot of ventilation noise—a common problem in hotel venues. If the people in the back have to strain to hear you, you will rapidly lose their interest in your talk. In these circumstances, people may begin to have side-conversations in the back of the room and then more people will be unable to hear you. Don't worry about talking too loudly for the front row. If you are careful to make eye contact frequently with people in the back row, you will know if you are holding their attention. Make an effort to speak loudly enough for them. If everybody in the back of the room is thumbing through their programs, rather than watching you, you are losing them.
5. Use your notes minimally so that the audience senses that you are confident about your work and enthusiastic about this opportunity to describe it to others. Do not, under any circumstances, simply stand at the podium and read directly from your paper notes. Likewise, there should not be so much material on your slides that you are simply reading what it says on your slides. The audience can read faster than you can talk. Be selective about the most important points to put on your slides, and use the verbal part of your presentation to round out the points that your slides display. If you are lucky enough to have had a few terms of teaching experience already, all of this will be easier. If you have not done your own lecturing, it may be harder.
6. Incorporate gestures that enhance your message, but only to the extent that they seem natural for you. Do not stand with your hands stuffed rigidly into your pockets, or with your hands clasped in front of you or behind you. More than just your mouth should move during the presentation. And avoid folding your arms across your chest, since it tends to make you look defensive about your work. "Body language" is important.
7. Avoid distracting or repetitive gestures like jingling your keys in your pockets or checking or adjusting your clothing, or fiddling with jewelry (rings, or earrings—one of my constant temptations). These kinds of habits can be very apparent if you watch yourself on videotape.

#### Your discussant

1. Remember that your discussant has taken the time to read your paper and deserves his or her full share of the program to deliver a few points. Take notes while they talk. In real time, while the discussant speaks, you will have to pick out just one or maybe two points that you feel deserve "rebuttal" in this public forum. Hopefully, your discussant will have been polite and helpful, rather than rapier-like in their criticism.

- Thank them for their thoughtful remarks and mention that there is just one thing (or maybe two things) you'd like to clear up now, but "we can talk about your other points afterwards (or offline)...since they've given me some good ideas" or "...since I think I'll need a little more clarification on those issues." It isn't a disaster if you can't answer somebody's challenging question on the spot. "Thank you for raising that issue. I don't have an answer for that question on the spot, but I certainly *should* have one. I'll have to sort that out before the next time I present this research."
2. If the session chair inadvertently forgets to give you a chance to rebut your discussant, and there is still time in the schedule to do so, it is OK to politely ask the chair if you can take a moment to respond briefly to one or two of the points about which you feel a need to make clarifications. ("Excuse me, X, may I respond to that?) You are not expected to respond to every single point your discussant has brought up.
  3. Be sure to time your presentation appropriately. Within the minutes allotted for all activities related to your paper, you will have to get to the podium and be introduced. You also want to leave adequate time for your discussant, and then your selected responses to the discussant's points, and then maybe a couple of questions or points from the audience. The chair is supposed to call the shots, but he/she may invite you to take questions yourself. If somebody in the audience is rambling on for too long, a glance to the session chair will sometimes help you get out of it. Or you can say "Very interesting. But perhaps we can continue this afterwards, since we'd like to stay on schedule here."
  4. Always have in reserve a little bit of "bonus" material about your paper. If you finish on time and your discussant doesn't use all of the time allotted to him or her, or if your discussant fails to make it to the meeting, you don't want to just forfeit that time. Likewise, if nobody from the audience has any questions, you might have in reserve a sensible question that you want to ask them—perhaps that you are interested in hearing people's opinions about where to go next with the research

**BE WELL PREPARED IN ADVANCE OF THE CONFERENCE, ARRIVE READY TO LEARN INTERESTING NEW THINGS, MEET NEW FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES, AND HAVE FUN!!**