Neuro Journal Club Presentation Tips

1. Practice! Probably in front of a colleague who will give you feedback.

2. In your introduction, give equal weight to completeness and brevity. Try to consider the most important things the audience needs to know to put the paper in context. Make sure you explain the premise of the experiments, perhaps with a drawing (or drawings) if the authors don't provide a nice picture that illustrates the premise.

3. Make sure the graphs that you show are easy to understand, perhaps by preparing the viewer for the content by illustrating intermediate steps between data and graph.

4. Do some homework; if the paper builds upon previous work, go read the most relevant previous papers to be prepared for questions from the audience.

5. Desktop publishing hints. Use 16-point fonts at a minimum, preferably 24 or larger; 14-point can pass as an axis label. Don’t draw anything important on the outer 5% of the screen edges. Keep text at a minimum, and tell your story with images as you can.

6. Tell a story; one doesn’t need to present every panel of every figure, or to present the figures in order. Do it in the way that you feel makes the best story (though consider that the authors probably put the figures together in the way they thought made the best story). Feel free to mark up the figures with clarifying words or symbols. Borrow ideas from presentations you like.

7. Be specific with your criticism. Examples: Don’t say “The authors should have done more controls”; say “Because the authors did not provide a control for possibility X, the result in experiment Y is ambiguous”. Don’t just add a wish list of experiments; be specific about what each one would add: “If the authors had done experiment A, then they would be able to go further and say either B or C.”

8. Allow your presentation to be interactive. When answering questions or comments, maintain an inviting atmosphere to encourage more audience members to speak up and give their opinions. If someone asks a question, restate it to verify that you understand the question (and so all can hear it). If someone criticizes an experiment, don’t feel a need to defend the paper as though it were your own. Be a moderator. Maybe say “if the authors were here, they might respond to that by saying…” Don’t feel a need to pass judgment on every comment; one can say “I take your point”, or “I see that argument”. If you don’t know the answer to a question because it is out of your field, it’s often educational to ask if anyone else in the room might want to comment, and it keeps audience participation up.

9. During your presentation, keep track of your time. If circumstances permit you to have less time than you’d planned (such as an A/V problem, or if the previous speaker has gone over, whatever), adjust the pace of your presentation to match the time you have. (If for some reason you have more time than you planned—for example, the previous speaker finishes early—you don’t need to expand to fill all of the time.) Time management takes some practice but it’s worth starting this practice now. Your audience will appreciate it.

Steve's talk notes

• Give your talk 3-4 times in practice to help work out the main ideas.
• If you find that you repeatedly get tripped up while presenting a specific slide (or taking too long), then 1) either there’s something wrong with what you are trying to say (not a main idea, or something is not logically or simply explained), or 2) there is something wrong with the connection between what you’re trying to say and the slide. Either situation requires an edit of the talk and/or the slide. Sometimes this situation can be fixed by changing or adding a keyword on the slide, a reminder to yourself -- but just a word to the audience -- to direct you how to deliver it.
• Some people like to practice a talk until it is memorized; I like to practice only once or twice after getting all the bugs worked out so my brain still has a little something to do during the talk; I think this helps to keep my delivery more natural.
• Practice an important talk in front of an audience. It’s amazing how something can sound good to your dog but then sound totally unnatural or illogical when spoken to humans.
• During the talk, I do not allow my own laptop to display the slides (I turn that feature off); I find that I am tempted to look at the laptop. I prefer to force myself to look at the audience or the screen and have those be my only options.
• As you get a little more advanced, look at the faces of people in the audience. Are they lost? Are they interested? What worked and what didn’t? Some sleepiness in an audience is quite normal (people are busy), and don't be offended if someone walks out (you don't know why, it's probably not boredom; an appointment, a class, who knows? don’t worry about it).
• Please don't use written notes! Some people have a tendency to want to use notes because they are nervous about forgetting details, but this actually creates a barrier between you and the audience and makes the details of the presentation harder to follow. You can get around this by practicing your presentation, and adding your own axis labels or other (very brief) labels on the slide to help you through any points where you tend to get stuck. Take a leap of faith! Go without notes!

Presentation links

• Color-blind friendly: About 10% of men are red/green color-blind, so about 5% of your audience is red/green color-blind. (GFP and anything red? A problem.) Learn how to prepare color-blind friendly presentations here.
• Matt Might’s 10 Tips for Academic Talks
Related articles

- Neuro Journal Club Presentation Tips
- Neuro Journal Club Paper Selection Tips