Connecting People to Useful Information

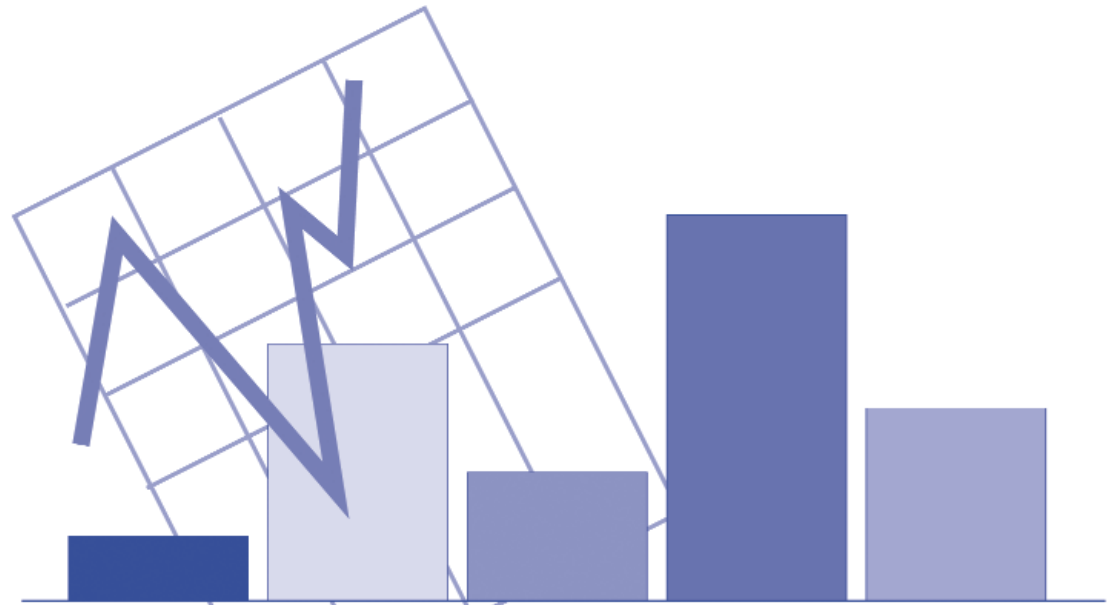## guidelines for effective data presentations

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guidelines for effective data presentations

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INTRODUCTION

Population and health studies, demographic surveys, censuses, and other research findings can play a key role in guiding policy and resource-allocation decisions. Yet every year, millions of dollars are spent to produce research results that fail to reach decision-makers in a way that they can understand and use.

We can all give examples of the well-intentioned presenter who shows slide after slide of complex tables loaded with data points, only a tiny fraction of which are relevant to the discussion. The presenter may use a pointer or attempt to cover up large portions of the table to focus attention on the right data. By the time the audience figures out where to look, it is time to move to the next slide! The audience is distracted and unable to focus on key points. Though the presenter may be an expert, the inability to present information in a clear, accessible manner can leave the audience confused or, worse yet, asleep!

The purpose of this guide is to give practical advice and examples in the art of presenting data to nonspecialist audiences. It is intended for people whose positions require interpreting and disseminating information to a variety of audiences that may not be familiar with statistics. Potential users of the guide include staff of statistical offices, research institutions, public- and private-sector population and health programs, monitoring and evaluation units, donor agencies, and universities.

This guide addresses a number of questions for developing effective presentations: What are the essential steps in organizing an effective presentation? What are the most common dos and don'ts for creating text and graphic slides? How can you make your presentation compelling and memorable? How can you ensure that a dissemination seminar will be well organized and successful?

The guide contains four sections that present practical techniques on how to organize and deliver effective presentations and organize a successful data dissemination seminar. The guide also contains two appendices with sample slides and reference material for preparing presentations in PowerPoint. Everything in the guide, including the Power-Point presentations, can also be downloaded from the accompanying CD-ROM.

1 Six Steps to Developing an Effective Presentation

IN THIS SECTION

Overview: Six Steps to Developing an Effective Presentation

Follow these steps so that you don't get distracted with creating fancy slides* before your presentation is well thought out.

STEP 1: LIST YOUR COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES

Why do you want to give this presentation?
- Raise awareness about new research findings?
- Seek support?
- Introduce a new strategy?
- Clarify a controversial issue?
- Provide information to help policymakers make decisions?
- Redirect program priorities?
- Seek feedback?

What do you hope to gain?
- What specific outcome would you like to see come out of the presentation?
- How will you know if you have succeeded?

STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE AUDIENCE AND FOCUS ON THE AUDIENCE'S PARTICULAR NEEDS

Who are they? Policymakers? Program managers? Journalists? Other researchers? A mix?
- Are there different subgroups within the larger audience?
- Why are they at the presentation?
- What specifically do they expect to get from your presentation?
- How will they react to your message?

✳ *In this guide, the terms "slides" and "overheads" are used interchangeably.*

Focus on what your audience needs to know, not on what you know. If you don't know the audience's needs and expectations, you can find out by asking some representatives of the target audience. Alternatively, if you are one presenter in a larger meeting, you can ask the meeting organizers for guidance.

Consider the audience's level of technical knowledge, motivations, and interests. If it is a mixed audience, try to identify their common interests and needs.

Consider what information other presenters might be giving to the audience.

Decide what you hope the audience will do as a result of the presentation. If you have a clear idea of what you want the audience to do as the result of your presentation, it will guide how you lay out the presentation.

Anticipate possible questions.

STEP 3: DETERMINE THE MESSAGE

Identify no more than three points that you want the audience to remember, and build the presentation around these points.

Tailor the points to the audience's technical level, information needs, and interests. Avoid technical jargon. No matter how many presentations you do on any one subject, it will always be necessary to modify the presentation a little for each new audience.

STEP 4: ORGANIZE YOUR INFORMATION

Determine the amount of time available for the presentation.

Establish an outline that matches your objectives.

Content to include:
- An introduction to the problem, linked to audience concerns;
- Key messages (what you want the audience to remember);
- Objectives of the research;
- A brief (no more than one slide) description of the methodology;
- Major findings and implications; and
- Recommendations, if appropriate.

Structure:
- Introduce the key messages;
- Develop each point; and
- Summarize the key messages again.

Keep in mind that approaches to policy and academic presentations are different; remember that policymakers want to hear statements of problems and their solutions.

Policy presentation
- Key messages
- Data linked to audience's concerns
- Recommendations without excessive qualifiers

Academic presentation
- Theoretical framework
- Methodology (for credibility)
- Results and discussion

STEP 5: DESIGN THE "LOOK" OF YOUR SLIDE PRESENTATION

Choose a slide background and colors that are appropriate for the audience and comfortable for you. If you don't know what the audience prefers or have never presented for this audience before, test some slides with a representative of the audience or someone who knows the audience well.

The slide background should also be appropriate for the viewing environment. For dark rooms, light text on dark backgrounds works well; for light rooms, dark text on a light or clear background may be more readable.

Apply the same style to each slide.

Avoid visual clutter, such as excessive use of clipart or cartoons (see Section 3 for more tips on preparing slides). Sometimes a touch of humor can be an effective way to connect with your audience, but use humor only if you know it is appropriate for the audience, country, and situation.

Follow the KISS rule: Keep It Short and Simple.

Show key points only—the full message should be in your speech.

Use short words and short phrases. A good rule to follow is to have no more than *six words per line and six lines per overhead* (not counting the title).

Include one idea per overhead. Use more than one slide if you have several related points.

Use strong statements; use action verbs to describe next steps or policy implications.

Show one slide per minute as a general rule, but try to vary the speed at which you show slides.

Round off numbers on graphs and in text, unless the decimal point is critical (such as for fertility data).

Use special effects such as animation *sparingly,* only to enhance your presentation. Too many visual effects can distract audiences from your message. (See Section 3 for more tips on preparing slides.)

Use animation only if you or the person assisting with slides can practice the slide show in advance. If you are preparing a presentation for someone else, it is safer to leave the animation out.

Add a last slide (blank or with a photo) to signal the end of the slide show to the presenter and audience.

STEP 6: CREATE AND ASSEMBLE THE VISUALS

Decide the best way to display the information: Text? Charts? Clip art?

Check for consistency: Use the same font and color throughout the presentation. Use the same color, pattern, or ordering when referring to time periods, regions, male/female differences, and so on.

Check for variety: Are there six text slides in a row when a graphic, flow chart, or diagram could tell the story better?

Make sure the presentation fits in the allocated time. Aim to present one slide per minute, and practice to find out how you do.

Have the last word!
- Design an effective summary slide: What do you want your audience to remember? It is customary for the last slide or two to be a list of recommended actions, but don't take this as a requirement.
- You can also use the opportunity to be innovative, such as by putting a human face on the numbers or referring to a local saying. Or you can end the presentation with one last compelling thought, such as letting the audience know the possible consequences of not taking action on a particular issue.

COMMON PRESENTATION PROBLEMS AND THEIR SOLUTIONS

The presenter fails to motivate the audience in the first few minutes.
- People listen more intelligently if they know the significance of the information right up front, so give them the news very early in the presentation.

The structure of the presentation is not clear from the beginning.
- Effective presentations start with a contents slide. This slide could, for example, provide a bulleted list of the presentation's sections: objectives, research methods, major findings, program implications, and recommended actions.
- A contents slide may not be necessary for a brief presentation, but the structure should be clear even without such a slide.

There are gaps in logic. Researchers are often so close to the material that they omit essential connections, especially when presenting a lot of material in a short period of time.
- Ask someone to review your presentation beforehand to ensure that an "outsider" can follow the data and arguments.

The presentation goes into excessive detail. Including everything you know, rather than what is really relevant and essential, is a common error.
- Focus on your one to three main points and provide only the information needed to support these points.

The slides or overheads are illegible. Small fonts, overcrowded slides, and poor color combinations can hamper readability.
- Follow the KISS rule, and make sure that people sitting in the back of the room can read the slides.

2 Delivering an Oral Presentation

1. GETTING READY: THINGS TO DO BEFORE YOUR PRESENTATION

Know the material well.

Learn about the audience (see Section 1 for more on preparing your presentation).

Prepare speaking notes.

Practice in advance.
- Rehearse the entire presentation *out loud.*
- Time the presentation and adjust the content to match the allotted time.
- If someone else is changing your slides or overheads, practice with him or her in advance.

For formal presentations, visit the location beforehand.
- Become familiar with the surroundings.
- Arrive early, walk around the speaking area, stand at the podium, speak into the microphone, become familiar with equipment, and practice using your slides or overheads.

2. ORGANIZING YOUR DELIVERY

Remember to follow this basic structure: Tell the audience what you are going to say, say it, and tell the audience what you said.
The most memorable parts of your presentation are its beginning and ending. If you lose the audience during your presentation, you can get them back at the end by reminding them of what you told them.

General tips:
- Announce your topic clearly;
- State your objective up front;
- Give an outline of your presentation in your introduction; and
- Use transitions at the beginning of each major section.

A good transition looks back at what you just spoke about and links it to what you are going to talk about next.

THE OPENING

Very briefly tell the audience who you are and where you're from, then gain their attention. Try one of these:
- Use humor (with caution: Know your audience);
- Tell a personal anecdote;
- Create verbal imagery ("Let's imagine for a second…");
- Issue a challenge ("How many of our youth will we lose to AIDS in the next decade?");
- Read a quote; or
- Provide a compelling fact.

Now that you have their attention, "Tell the audience what you are going to say"—tell them your main points.

THE MIDDLE

"Say it"—organize the presentation around your key points. New information and ideas tend to stick best in listeners' minds when presented in series of three.

THE CLOSING

"Tell the audience what you have said":
- Summarize your main message by repeating the key points.
- Encourage action, where appropriate.
- Refer back to your opener.
- End on a positive note.
- Ask the audience whether they have questions.

THE QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD

Accept questions and comments graciously.

Let audience members know that their questions are valid by saying things like, "That's an excellent point," or, "A very good question."

When you don't know the answer, offer to find out and get back to the person asking the question. Try to offer related information that you do know.

3. FOCUSING ON YOUR STYLE, VOICE, APPEARANCE, AND BEHAVIOR

STYLE

Your style is the way you deliver what you have to say.

Three important qualities of oral style:
- Clarity—Use short, simple phrases with no filler words.

- Appropriateness—Personalize the presentation to the audience. Use personal pronouns whenever possible.
- Vividness—Evoke mental images.

To read or not to read?
- Do not read your entire presentation.
- You can sometimes read key parts for emphasis, impact, or accuracy, as in the following situations:
  • To quote an author accurately;
  • To present figures or provide precise details;
  • To communicate a complex concept clearly or provide a definition;
  • To stick to a previously released text (for example, if you are using a text released to the media); or
  • To hold your speech to strict time limits.
- Write your notes in language as you would speak—language that is immediately understandable to the ear, without the need for reflection that written language allows.
- Do not turn your back to the audience to read from the screen.

Build rapport:
- Make eye contact.
- Use humor carefully.
  Humor isn't always about telling jokes. It can mean introducing amusing, whimsical, or otherwise entertaining elements that make it easier for you to make a connection with your audience, put you and them at ease, and reinforce your message.
- Think about drama.
  Drama can be created with your timing, words, gestures, and voice. Try using numbers, ratios, and other hard facts, or a smooth, slower-paced delivery to add drama to your presentation.
- Be yourself.
  Your audience will be most at ease if you speak naturally. If you are not comfortable with humor and drama, then it may be better not to try these techniques.

VOICE
A good voice has a pleasant tone; is natural, reflecting the speaker's personality; has vitality, giving the impression of force and strength even when it isn't especially loud; portrays various shades of meaning and is never monotonous or emotionless; and is easily heard because it uses proper volume and articulation.

Project your voice:
- Speak to the back of the room to ensure that everyone can hear you, but be careful not to shout!
- Vary the pitch of your voice to convey emotion and conviction.
- Make a conscious effort to be conversational in your speaking.

Pause for emphasis:
- Vary your speaking rate to add interest to the presentation and emphasize specific points.
- Try to avoid pauses that last more than four seconds when nothing is happening.

Speak slowly, and remember to breathe:
- Relax to reduce tension in your voice, and think friendliness, confidence, and a desire to communicate.

APPEARANCE AND BEHAVIOR

Dress appropriately for the audience. If you are unsure what to wear, you should dress more formally than you think your audience will be dressed.

Face your audience, not the screen. It's okay to look at the screen once in a while, but these should be momentary glances only.

Avoid distracting gestures such as waving or tapping your hands.

Use a pointer as necessary to help guide the audience.

4. DEALING WITH NERVES

Harness your nervous energy with confidence-building tasks:
- Prepare: Know the material, room, and audience.
- Practice your presentation out loud in advance.
- Get to know your audience by greeting some of them as they arrive and making them your "friends."

Try several ways to relax:
- Do deep-breathing exercises.
- Stand or sit comfortably with your back straight.
- Visualize yourself giving a successful presentation.
- During your presentation, find a friendly face in the audience and look at him or her to reassure yourself.
- Realize that audiences want speakers to be interesting, stimulating, informative, and entertaining. They want you to succeed, not fail.

Accept that it's normal to be a little nervous.
- Don't apologize for being nervous; you will only draw attention to it.
- Concentrate on the message, not on your nervous feelings.
- Practice often and gain experience; you will build confidence while decreasing anxieties.

5. TIPS ON PRESENTING WITH AN INTERPRETER

Find an interpreter who has experience with the subject being presented.

Prepare a glossary ahead of time, especially for interpreters less familiar with the subject.

Give speaker notes to the interpreter as far in advance as possible.

If you will be using consecutive translation (where a person speaks and then pauses for translation), time your presentation to take into consideration the added time for translation, and take frequent pauses for translation.