

GIVING A GOOD NETS TALK

*Adapted from 'Advice for a successful conference talk' (Prof. Dave Kelly, Canterbury University, <http://www.nzesconference.org.nz/registration>), and Jamie Smith, Judith Myers, Isla Myers-Smith (2007) *Tips for Effective Communication in Ecology. Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America: Vol. 88, No. 2, pp. 206-215.**

NETS is a strange beast as far as conferences go, because it is a mix of science, policy, and management and includes many people from different types of institutions and walks of life. However, there are many rules about giving talks that are universal.

15 minute talks are not 'scanned in' scientific journal articles, policy documents, flow diagrams or management plans. They are an opportunity to present a few essential pieces of information to your audience with 1 or 2 simple take home messages.

You must walk a fine line between boring the audience with details, and skipping over essential information. It's better to be too brief than too detailed as people can ask you for more details in the question time or during breaks.

USING POWERPOINT

A good rule of thumb here is to get a piece of A4 paper and fold it in half to make it A5. Now hold the A5 page at arm's length and back away from your computer screen until the A5 page hides the computer screen. That is the view the audience will get. Revise (enlarge, simplify) your talk until everything on it is visible from that distance.

Basic message: Plain background, clear font (eg. Arial), large text, few words

- Choose your background carefully. A plain white (or other pale colour) slide has several advantages (e.g., more space is available, lettering is easier to read). Patterns, borders, gradient fills or photographs as backgrounds should be avoided. Restrict logos to the first slide.
- Choose the colour of your text and background carefully. Black/dark blue text on a white or light background optimizes contrast. Dark backgrounds in dark rooms can put your audience to sleep. Combinations of either pastel (e.g., yellow on pale blue) or dark colors (e.g., red on blue) may look good on your computer screen, but are disastrous when projected. Don't forget that some people are red/green colour blind.
- Choose an easy-to-read, block font such as Arial, rather than a serif font such as Times New Roman. Use LARGE lettering (>24-28 point).
- Images should be scanned or 'pasted in' at 1024 x 768 resolution or better and high colour depth (true colour). The audience will not be able to see small (taking up only a small portion of the screen), poor resolution images.
- Keep each visual aid simple. A good rule of thumb is to make ONE point per aid. Only write as much as you need to make that point; complete sentences are not required. In the final check of your talk eliminate all unnecessary words. Maximum is about 5 words per line and about 20 words per slide. If your text slide has more than 40 words, it needs to be rewritten.
- Use colours, arrows, cartoons, and bullets to highlight points.

- Use graphs rather than tables. Label axes clearly in large letters. Small tables are acceptable, but avoid tables with more than 3 rows and 3 columns (max. 20 numbers). Do not cut and paste complicated tables from reports/policy documents. Instead rewrite and simplify tables, highlighting the most important pieces of data.
- Do not scan in and use flow diagrams. Your audience will never be able to read them. Rewrite and simplify the diagram in Powerpoint.
- Avoid, or reduce as much as possible, 'bells and whistles' like moving objects or bulleted statements that fly in when you click them.
- Reduce the amount of 'building' in your slide – it's distracting for you and the audience if you have to click the mouse for each line to show up.
- Use informative video/audio clips only when they can be run on the technology that you will have available for your presentation. It can be effective to use multipanel graphics, adding one panel at a time, but make sure figure labels are legible.
- When "borrowing" photographs from the internet, credit the photographer/source.

SPEAKING SKILLS

- Speak slowly and clearly and make sure you can be heard.
- Make your vocal delivery interesting by varying your tone of voice.
- Express ENTHUSIASM for your topic (your talk is interesting and important) – don't apologise for anything (e.g. "this graph is messy but...").
- Address your remarks towards the back of the room and make eye contact with members of the audience.
- Don't speak to the screen! Don't read word-for-word from the screen.
- Don't block the screen
- Don't refer to notes more than necessary. If you read your talk, your voice will be a monotone and the pace too fast. People will lose interest in what you are saying. Instead, use your visual aids to prompt you on what to say next.
- Don't pace about the lecture room or play with objects such as pens or loose change in your pocket.
- Before your presentation ask your colleagues to listen to a practice of your talk and ask them for suggestions for improvements.
- Time your practice talk. It is fine to talk for less than your allotted time (more time for questions), but it always offends if you talk for too long. Rule of thumb = about 1.2 slides per minute is the correct timing for a 15 minute talk.
- Question time: keep your answers short – don't go on!