Crimes and Misdemeanors:
Tips on Collegiality in Professional Paper Presentations

Pamela H. Simpson, Washington and Lee University

You have all seen it. Or heard about it. One person in a session seems to think what he or she has to say is so important that it warrants going over the twenty minutes allotted. Sometimes two or three presenters think it is simply impossible to say what they have to say in twenty minutes and each goes over a little--only five minutes--that's not much, right? No one really expects you to do this in exactly twenty minutes, do they? The results? Each of those over-runs adds up; the last presenter has only ten minutes; the audience has no time for questions at all; the meeting organizer is banging on the door trying to get the next session into the room.

The failure to stay within the twenty-minute time slot might not seem like a capital crime, but it is the equivalent of getting up in front of your colleagues and declaring, "What I have to say is so important that it justifies my stealing the time of others on this panel and of the audience. [1]

Here are some hints for avoiding such "white-collar crime" and presenting a successful paper:

1. **Write it ahead of time**. Since usually you are required to submit your paper to the session chair before the meeting, one would think everyone ought to know exactly how long the paper is. Still, there are those who submit a 20-page paper and ignore the chair's suggestions for cutting it. Common sense and experience indicate that a <u>twenty-minute paper is about 10 pages long</u>. That is with double spacing, 12-point type, and normal margins. Depending on how fast you read it will be about two minutes per page. The <u>papers must be written</u>. Loading a computer full of images and talking from notes may be appropriate for a classroom lecture, but not for a formal paper session at a professional meeting.

2. **Stick to your script**. Even with a 10-page text, some people find it impossible not to give a few asides or impromptu digressions in the course of reading the paper. All of these add minutes taking away from the time allotted to others. Stay at the podium too. There is no need to wander about the stage. If you want to point to something on the screen, bring a laser pointer. Don't distract your audience and yourself by dancing back and forth in front of the bright lights.

3. **Practice it**. If you are going to give a good paper, it has to be prepared ahead of time and practiced. Everyone gets nervous. Those people in the audience are your professional peers. Their opinions are ones you value. The key to doing the presentation well is to know your script. Practicing in front of friends and colleagues at home before you come to the meeting not only gives you familiarity with your text; it also can provide some useful feedback. Are your points clear? Does that image illustrate your ideas? Are you speaking clearly and slowly enough? Better to have your friends tell you than embarrass yourself at the meeting.

---

[1] Patricia Marinardi wrote an essay for the College Art Association on "White Collar Crime" a number of years ago. The comment on stealing time is a paraphrase of her statement on the subject.

4. **Digital Images**. How many times have you seen presenters glance over at the screen and say, "Oh, where did that come from?" and then click the projector back and forth in confusion? It would not happen if they had practiced reading the paper with the images beforehand. It can be helpful to put a red star into the text every time you plan to advance to the next image. Thus, as you read along and come to a red star, you know to punch the button. Write the names of the appropriate images in the margin near the star so you know what you meant to show. And practice it until all goes smoothly. Avoid having to go backward. Duplicate your images if you need to repeat them. Do whatever is necessary so all you have to do is push that advance button.

You will be using digital images. You need to bring your own laptop, cable hookup, etc. Compatibility is always an issue; so if you need technical help, check with those who can help you before you get to the meeting. And if you are a Macintosh user, be certain to bring the proper VGA adapter. Do not assume you can use someone else's laptop.

5. **Plan for disaster**. What is the worst thing that can happen during a presentation? It might be that the technology doesn't work, so it helps to have a backup—a CD or flash drive. Get to the room ahead of time to make sure it works and you have time to find help if you need it. Don't made the mistake I recently saw where a speaker had her paper on the same computer she planned to use to show her images. She had planned to read the paper from the computer screen, but of course, you can't if you are using it for the images. She would have known the problem if she had practiced before hand.

Another problem I saw was someone trying to use an ArtStor presentation but the computer didn't have the off-line image viewer. You can download it, but it takes time, so you don't want to discover that you have to do that when you get up to talk. Power Point is probably easier than MDID or ArtStor for presentations off your home campus. Be prepared and anticipate problems before you get there.

And it is always a good idea to carry your paper, laptop, and your backup with you on the plane. Don't check them with your bags. The last thing you need to worry about is lost luggage.

It is a great honor for your paper to have been chosen for presentation. Your ideas in the abstract have been interesting enough for selection. Now you have to do the hard work of writing the paper. If circumstances change and you cannot attend the meeting, let the organizers know in plenty of time for them to re-arrange the paper sessions. It is inconsiderate and professionally inappropriate to withdraw at the last minute or simply not show up for the meeting.

Finally, remember this is a paper, not the whole dissertation or book. You have to decide how to limit it to the twenty-minute format. If the text is more than 10 pages, cut it. When it comes to the presentation, stick to your script and practice, practice, practice. If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing well, especially in front of your professional colleagues.