Presentation Tips for Speakers
(P. Cerkez, PhD., Chair, 2016 Student presentation awards)

The Applied Imagery Pattern Recognition (AIPR) Annual Workshop typically attracts a varied audience. While there are most likely experts in your field attending your talk, also expect to have scientists and students from other fields, potentially journalists also. Consider these pointers to help ensure your talk or poster session is a success.

The following items and personal experiences represent knowledge, skills, and example experiences gained over 35+ years of either attending or presenting at various conferences and symposia. These tips apply not just to slide presentations, but poster sessions as well.

• **DON’T** read your slides to the audience! They can read the slide themselves faster than you can read it aloud. It also tends to imply you don’t thoroughly know your presentation and or the topic.

  *Almost every conference or symposium I’ve ever attended, there has been at least one presenter that has read their slides, word for word. (I’ve even witnessed more than once the old “following the bouncing ball” readings when laser pointers were used.) In every case, it has been easy to see how fast the presenter ‘lost’ their audience. People stop paying attention. On more than one occasion I’ve heard audience members walk out of a presentation stating “how stupid did [that presenter] think we are? We can read.”*

• **Know your material and presentation.** A truly effective presenter knows what information is on each slide and should rarely have to look at it or study it to continue the presentation.

  *Practice your presentation. Do it in front of a test audience (or yourself in a mirror). Know what you want to say about each slide. It is very obvious to an audience when a speaker knows their material and is presenting it and when they don’t!*

• **Laser Pointer:** Only use it to point out something then turn it off! There is almost nothing more distracting than looking at a slide being presented and the speaker is waving the laser all over the slide. Point at the object of interest, circle it once if need be, trace a path, etc., but once you’ve done that, turn it off!

  *Back in the late 80’s when laser pointers were expensive and all the rage among the “latest gadget” gang, I attended a conference of 250+ and all of us were laser safety trained (we were all military aircraft electronics specialist). One individual was doing his presentation with a laser pointer but he kept his finger on the button the whole time. The bad part was as he waved his hand around he was flashing the audience with the pointer. He had people diving under desks and hiding behind books after a while to avoid the beam. After about 10 minutes of this, the host took the laser away.

  Laser pointers can be very effective tools to aide a speaker in their presentation. However, use it judiciously. Time after time, at event after event, I’ve witnessed audience members who stop watching presentations because the speaker is randomly waving the pointer at the screen. More than a few audience members have mentioned feeling “sea sick” after watching presentations where the speaker continually wiggles the pointer, some leaving the room.*

• **Focus** on a few key points you want your audience to remember and build the rest of your information around those. Include the “big picture” of your topic, why it matters, and at an appropriate level of detail to emphasize your points.

  *In a presentation, do not try to describe all the miniscule details of your topic. Hit the high points and only the associated lower level ones needed to get the message across you want to convey.*

• **Verbal tools:** Consider what will strike a chord with your audience.

  *The better you know your material, the easier it is to do this. Don’t force it, be relaxed. Enjoy yourself. Practice!*

  Use examples, stories, and analogies that illustrate key takeaways more clearly than excess or very technical information. Vary your vocal pacing, your tone. Use your voice for emphasis when appropriate.*
• **Choose your words.** Explain concepts so that attendees outside your immediate field can understand. Define technical terms.

Don’t “talk down” to the audience. Define terms either on the slide or verbally as part of the flow of the presentation. Remember, terms can have different meanings in other fields. Context is important.

• **Slides** can be a double edged sword: useful or distraction. Tailor your slides to the general audience.

Slides are for talking points, to focus your audience, to present a graphic that reports data, or is the focus of the presentation at that point. For text slides, have no more than 6 bullets per slide. If there’s too much text, the audience won’t absorb it. Use multiple slides if necessary. Arrange bullets in a logical order (i.e., each builds on the previous, sequential, importance, etc.). (Also, see “Ducks” below.)

Choose colors carefully! Slides should be able to be seen and read from the back of the room. Test your slides with a projector in a lighted room to verify color choices (don’t trust the colors used on a monitor or laptop screen) Use visuals (charts or graphs) for complex data if possible. People absorb visual data faster than numbers.

• **Non-verbal communication.**

Smile! Stand up straight. Talk with confidence, remember, you know your presentation inside and out. Look at your audience while speaking (don’t keep your head down, talking into your notes).

Don’t gesture randomly, do it purposefully for emphasis. Practice! Effective gesturing can help you speak more smoothly. Make eye contact and be yourself. Excessive motion can be more of a distraction, taking away from your presentation, than doing nothing. Find that happy medium. Practice! Have someone critique you presenting your talk.

• **Don’t speak in a monotone** or speak too quickly; pace yourself.

Monotone speaking dulls the senses, sometimes putting people to sleep, (think hypnotist) and speaking too quickly will cause many audience members to lose interest because they don’t have time to process the new material being presented. (I have to constantly remind myself to slow down when I do presentations, something very common with many speakers.)

I had a professor back in the mid 90’s (for 3 different classes) who was horrible at giving presentations and lectures (haven’t we all experienced this at one time or another). Outside of the classroom, he was animated, engaging, obviously knew the topics incredibly well and loved discussing them. He would light up. As engaging as he was outside the classroom, as soon as he put a slide up at a conference or in the classroom, he switched to a dry, monotone voice and dragging pace. It was a serious, continuous conscious effort to listen to him present. I actually witnessed another student fall asleep and smack his head (rather loudly) on the desk 15 minutes into one class lecture. I also suffered a few head nods in his classes. Every student I’ve ever talked to who had him said the same thing. Interestingly, like me, all really admired and respected this guy and learned more from him outside of the classroom than in it.

Don’t be like this professor. :-) Get your “voice” ready to present. The audience really does want to hear about your work.

• **Engage your audience.** Consider asking questions of the audience during your presentation.

Don’t always expect an answer, plant a seed. “Hook” your audience. Rhetorical questions sometimes work very well. The question becomes a focus point. The question remains in their head and they try to associate your slide(s) with the question as you speak.

• **No Ducks!** Don’t put ‘stuff’ on your slides that don’t contribute to your topic.

‘Duck’ is a term used by Edward Tufte and refers to chart junk (including gratuitous animations), excess ‘stuff’ on a slide that has no value. (There are many other good sources for creating presentations but try googling Edward Tufte and do a little reading about his views on power points and effective presentations, both slides and posters.)

• **What annoys you when listening to a presentation? Don’t do it!**

Finally, imagine yourself sitting in a presentation or think back to presentations you’ve attended, both good and bad. What did good speakers do that kept you engaged? What did bad or ineffective ones do that caused you to lose interest (i.e., start checking your phone, working on laptop, etc.) or walk out of the session?

Practice! Do what is good, avoid doing what doesn’t work. Use a test audience for feedback. Practice!