How to Present a Paper in Theoretical Computer Science: A Speaker’s Guide for Students

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September 6, 2006

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Introduction

- Often you need to present your own or others work
- Success in academia can be assisted by being a good speaker
Outline

What To Say and How to Say It

Getting Through to the Audience

Visual and Aural Aids

Question Time

Strong and Weak Points

Resource
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Key Idea

Laying the foundation for giving a good talk!

▶ Focus on the key idea (ONE)!
▶ Skip what is standard or obvious (ask a colleague)
   ▶ Naturally in the paper

Examples

▶ “We present an extension to JUnit that minimizes the effort in building test fixtures”
▶ “We present a graph-based model for generating realistic synthetic data. We discuss how the model is implemented. Finally, we look at a distributed version of the implementation.”
Skip the Details

- Very important
  - To retain the attention of the audience
- Provide an overview of the key idea (and/or critical problems)
- At a conference the audience has not read your paper
- All details are in the paper ("go and read it")
  - Motivate the audience to read the paper

Examples

- Two optimized version of Intel assembler code plus number of CPU cycles to compute each
- Pseudo code okay (20 points font minimum)
Structure of Talk

- Split talk into distinct parts
- Make clear when a new part begins
- Guide the audience, make a transition statement

Examples

- Present the outline between parts
- Write the current part name in the header or footer of slide
Structure of a Talk

A general structure for a computer science talk

- Introduction (informal)
- Body (more formal, but abstract)
- Technicalities (details on the key parts of the paper)
- Conclusion (list key results and wrap up talk)
Introduction

First impression is important.
Sets the tone for the rest of the talk

- Audience ON or OFF

Content
- Define the problem (provide an intuition)
- Motivate the audience
  - Why is it a relevant problem?
  - Application of the key idea
  - Why is it non-trivial? (why did the paper get accepted?)
- Terminology
  - No Jargon
  - Avoid (too many) abbreviations
  - Example: test method, test case, and test suite
Introduction, cont.

Content (cont.)

- Related Work
  - Most recent (on conferences the previous years)
  - Most impact (seminal work in area)
  - Compare fair and directly

- Contribution of the paper
  - Why did the paper get accepted (elevator statement)
  - Must also be in the details in the paper

- Road map of talk
  - Short and specific
Body

The “meat” of your presentation.

Content

- Overview of major results
  - Example: major theorems, but not the proofs
  - Gradual introduction of technicalities
- Significance of results
  - Combine the introduction and the major results
  - Explain that the results can live up to what was stated in the introduction
- Sketch the proof of critical results
Technicalities

Most of the audience still follows your.

Experts may be bored.

Content

▶ Provide evidence that major results are correct
▶ Present a (one-and-only-one) key lemma
  ▶ Important, non-trivial, and fast to present
  ▶ Present lemma carefully (provide a structure)
Conclusion

Round off your talk nicely.

Content

- Clarity based on the three previous parts of the talk
- Open problems and future work
  - Good research always have many unanswered questions
- Indicate your are done
  - Example: Morten Olsen
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Resource
Type of Audience

- Scientists: Introduction and body
  - Define the terms used in computer science
- Computer scientists: Introduction, body, and small part of technicalities
  - Be careful with the definitions
- Theoretical computer scientists: Introduction, body, technicalities, conclusion
- Experts: Body and technicalities
Advise

A well-prepared talk can go wrong!

- Use repetition
  - Introduction: “We will look at”
  - Body/technicalities: “Look at”
  - Conclusion: “We have looked at”

- Remind to not assume
  - “Standard” may not be the case, ask a colleague
  - Example: Test case, test fixture, set up and tear down

- Be on time
  - “quality of talk is almost always inversely proportional to the time that it over-runs.” (page 7)

- Maintain eye contact
  - The session chair
Advise, cont.

- Control over voice and motion
  - Project energy without appearing hyperactive (page 7)
  - “Try not to remain rooted in one spot”
- Use plain English
  - Example: Practice words you find hard to pronounce.
- Control nerves
  - All are nervous
  - Be well prepared
  - Go through the slides just before the talk
- Avoid speaking from a prepared text!
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Advise

“Transparencies are an *adjunct* to your presentation”

- Know what hardware/software is available
- Right number of slides (1.5/2.0 minutes per slide)
- Right amount of text on slides (minimum 20 points font)
- Use colors efficiently
- Use figures and tables
- Beware of the microphone
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Types of Questions

1. The genuine request for knowledge
   ▶ What you will get at the exam!

2. The selfish question
   ▶ Seldom

3. The malicious question

Two commonly used sentences.
   ▶ “I would like to continue our discussion off-line after the talk”
   ▶ “I don’t know”
      ▶ Example: split operator
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Strong Points

- “Earlier version appeared in [2,3]” page 1.
- General structure of a talk plus variations depending on the audience.
- Uses general structure presented in Section 2 in remaining parts of the paper.
- Emphasis that introduction the most important (page 3).
- State the contribution made by your paper (page 3).
- Type of audience and where you can meet them.
- Many good and concrete practical suggestions
  - The microphone
  - Concrete suggestion on how to vary talk
  - How to prepare mentally for giving the talk
Weak Points

- Area theoretical computer science
- Use negation too much (state it positively instead)
  - “The author does not claim...” page 1
  - “Don’t be afraid to be innovative.” page 3
  - “Don’t Over-run” page 7
- Parts of the paper is outdated
  - Overheads projectors replaced by beamers
  - From 1993 PowerPoint invented since
- Use a table to present related work page 3
- “All terms must be introduced early”
- “This contains the meat of your presentation” (page 3) jargon?
  - Uses French “sang froid”, “de rigeur”
- Too few references
  - But it is not a technical paper
- Missing a conclusion/summary to wrap up the paper
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Links

- Writing and Presenting Your Thesis or Dissertation
  - Various comments on writing and presenting a thesis
- How to Have a Bad Career in Research/Academia (PowerPoint)
  - by David Patterson
- Tips on Giving a Good Demo
  - On giving a demo of a software product
- How to Get a Paper Accepted at OOPSLA
  - Number of “big” names discuss how to publish in a very good conference
- How to Be a Good Graduate Student
  - More general
- Webster online
  - How to pronounce words
Thank you for your attention