

Students

Presenting at the Annual Meetings for the First Time

by K. Ann Bybee-Finley

At the Tampa Annual Meetings, I gave my first talk as a scientist. Leading up to the meetings, a lot of people asked me if I was nervous, to which I replied assuredly, “No.” But the more the question was posed to me, the more I began to turn the matter over in my head. I wrote this article to share my experience with other students and also to remind the more tenured of optimistic youth.

I have seen numerous presentations—the good, the bad, and the ugly. I have listened to talks devoid of results; seen interesting subjects ruined by monotonous mumblers; and, perhaps most common of all, I have experienced presenters who spend too much time introducing a subject, only to rush through the more analytical (often more interesting) parts. My greatest fear was to lull people to sleep after lunch with drab slides and subject matter that failed to add anything new or interesting to the academic conversation. I set my aspirations high and wondered how I could deliver my results with the enthusiasm, articulation, and the effortless engagement of my favorite TED Talk presenters. In early September, I proclaimed to my labmates, “I am going to make the best PowerPoint this conference has ever seen!”

Before: The Preparation

I postponed the challenge of creating a 12-minute spiel that was holistic enough to describe my research goals until after the harvest. By mid-October, my new proclamation was, “I will somehow put together a coherent picture of my work.” I made a presentation and received feedback from my committee. Time to edit. I bemoaned (to myself), “How can I explain this topic, which took me weeks to understand, in a mere two minutes?” I presented my work

to my housemates (all science graduate students) and asked for their feedback. Another round of editing. After numerous revisions, my PowerPoint held little resemblance to its beginnings, and I was thankful. The lesson I took away from preparing for the Florida trip was that learning and presenting are both cumulative and interconnected. The more often you do them for a subject, the more comfortable you become.

During: The Philosophies of Science

My session began at 8 am in a medium-sized conference room. Older men in suits filled the seats; they all seemed to know each other, and the rapport between them was genial.

One after another, I listened to speakers whose research had nearly opposite philosophies to mine. And, for the first time, I worried. I felt my presentation was decent, and I was confident of my speaking ability, but now I was concerned about how my reasoning for this research would be received. Science research is objective in name, but rarely without opinions.

As the session continued, people trickled out of the room; after a while, the talks shifted out of crop management and edged to the ecol-

ogy side of the title. By 2:15 pm, the room was populated with fewer people wearing fewer suits, more beards, and a younger median age. My presentation appeared on the screen, and I eased the audience into my research by framing my priorities by its relevance to farmers. The 12 minutes passed without issue, and I finished before the moderator had a chance to stand. The lights in the room brightened, and I did my best to answer some interesting questions—a personal indicator of a talk gone well.

After: The Opportunity

The discussion that can result from a series of presentations can be a great way to get feedback, learn others’ opin-



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ions, and begin to network with people doing similar work. Yet the value of a discussion often depends on the ability of the moderator. I encourage first-time presenters to stick around and engage with people on their own who attended or spoke at their session. This year, I learned the importance of choosing the division or section that contains the most appropriate audience. With the increase of multi-disciplinary research, many talks can fit into multiple divisions and sections, and finding the best fit might take some asking around. That being said, I cannot underscore the importance of communication between different groups—whether the polarity is between the old and young, conventional and organic, or, even across climate ranges. Too often, we become ingrained in a particular school of thought, so we stop listening and we stop learning. The Annual Meetings is full of opportunities to cross boundaries and share the same session, and sometimes that takes a little risk.

Necessary Presentation Tips

Are you new to presenting? Here are some tips to be successful:

- Practice your talk. Know how much time you will take to introduce the topic, explain your research methods, and present your results. This will prevent you from rushing at the end.
- Know your audience. If you are not the first in your session, adjust your introduction to reduce redundancy.
- Look at your slides from a seat in the back of the room and make sure the information is visible. You want your talk to be understandable to everyone in the room, so make sure your font size is large enough, your axes are labeled, and your colors are varied enough for the colorblind.
- For the nervous: repeat this mantra, “The audience is there by choice; they are interested in the session that you are in and have decided to stay for your presentation.”

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Oklahoma State Finishes First in Region IV Soil Judging Contest

The 2013 Region IV Soil Judging Contest was hosted by the University of Arkansas on 17–18 October in Washington County, Arkansas. A total of 32 undergraduate students representing seven institutions throughout the region, including Louisiana State University, Oklahoma State University, Texas A&M University, Tarleton State University, Texas A&M University–Kingsville, Texas Tech University, and the University of Arkansas, participated in this year’s contest. Oklahoma State University took first place overall and had the first- and fifth-high individuals, Reilly Cloud and Dakota Janes, respectively. Texas A&M University took second place overall and had the second- and third-high individuals, Michael Massey and Alex Garcia, respectively. Texas Tech University took third place overall. Taylor McCumber was the fourth-high individual from Texas A&M University–Kingsville.



Pictured is the first place team, Oklahoma State University. Individuals from left to right are Dr. Brian Carter (professor/coach), Ryan Hall, Dakota Janes (5th-place individual), Reilly Cloud (1st-place individual), Nicole Reimondet, Bill Jones, Alexander Hannah, and Jared Dill.

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