

# How to Give a Seminar?

Department of Soil Biology, June 2020  
Suggestions for modifications? Please refer to Ellis Hoffland.

As with any other aspect of your thesis work, you must ask your supervisor for advice in preparing your seminar. Organize a rehearsal after which you can modify your presentation based upon suggestions of your supervisor. Plan the rehearsal and the seminar a minimum three weeks in advance.

## Preparation

Whenever you start preparing a presentation it is good to ask yourself some preliminary questions:

- What do I want to achieve with my presentation? What are my objectives?
- What kind of audience will I have?
- What do I consider most important about my topic? What are my priorities?
- What is my 'take-home message'?
- How much time do I have for my talk? Seminars at SBL usually last 30 minutes including a discussion, so it is good to target for a presentation of 20 minutes.

## The set-up of your seminar

- The starting point for any oral research presentation is a clear set-up, like: Introduction – Research Question or Hypothesis or Aim – Materials & Methods – Results – Discussion – Conclusions. Any other set-up is OK, as long as the research question/aim of your work and conclusions are explicitly put forward.
- For a proposal presentation you must stop after Materials & Methods and may end with some questions for discussion or consultation.
- It is absolutely necessary to present your research question/hypothesis/aim on a slide.
- Summarize the bottom line at the end, coming back to the research question/hypothesis/aim presented in the introduction. End with the 'take-home-message'.
- The structure of your talk should be:
  - Explain to the audience what you are GOING to tell them in the talk
  - TELL them
  - Summarise for the audience what you have just TOLD them
- Make sure your presentation does not last longer than 20 minutes. Therefore you have to practice (aloud!) a few times. If your rehearsal lasts too long, delete information. Don't try to gain time by speeding up, because you will likely lose the attention of your audience. You don't have to present everything you did!

## Slides

You need to use slides in order to make sure that the audience can follow your line of reasoning. Take care of the following:

- Use the Wageningen University & Research "Corporate design" Powerpoint template (in the red menu bar of Powerpoint on WUR computers – New Presentation) or contact your supervisor on what template to use. Use the standard slide size (4:3; under "Design" in the menu bar); the widescreen (16:9) does not fit on our screens.
- Slides are only useful if the audience can read them. Check this in advance in the back of the seminar room during your rehearsal, and correct for your final presentation if necessary. Use large letters, without serif (*schreef*) (for instance: Verdana, preferable minimum font size 22. *Never use font sizes smaller than 20*). Never use upper case only. Use *italics* for emphasis.
- Copies of Figures or Tables from a pdf of a publication are hardly ever suitable.
- Don't use too many slides. Estimate on average at least one minute per slide. So 20 slides is the maximum.

- Forget about an introducing slide telling that you start with an Introduction, will then proceed with Material & Methods, Results, and end with Conclusions. This is standard, so a waste of time to explain. Instead use a slide preparing the audience for your message.
- Don't put too much information on one slide. Only show relevant information.
- Tables are to be avoided, but if necessary reduce large tables to maximally 10 numbers and 2 or 3 rows and columns. Don't add table headings, explain orally.
- Figures and Tables from your thesis generally have to be edited before making them suitable for an oral presentation. Use colours in your graphs.
- When using colours: be aware than around 5% of the males are colour-blind, that is they are unable to see the difference between green and red.
- Only use keywords, not sentences. Make sure the audience is *listening* and not reading.
- Try to vary tables, text, equations, figures, etc.
- Refrain from using (too much) animations – the purpose of the presentation is not to show that you are an expert in all the nice things you can do with Powerpoint.

Make sure the slides support your talk, and not the other way around.

### **Your presentation**

- Speak up loudly, not monotonously, show your enthusiasm. Use short sentences.
- Make sure everybody can read your slides, don't stand in front of them.
- Never turn your back to the audience, address them directly, and keep eye contact. Don't talk to the screen.
- Do not stay put in the same position all the time. Move around. Don't put your hands in your trousers-pocket, but use them instead to emphasise what you are saying.
- Rehearse at least twice aloud before, so that you don't need to think about how to formulate sentences during the presentation. This prevents "eh"s, and is necessary to make sure you don't exceed 20 minutes.
- Take care everything is functioning by the time your presentation is supposed to start. So be there well in advance to make sure the presentation is installed, you have obtained a pointer from the reception, lights (curtains) in the room are OK, etc.

### **Nerves**

It is absolutely normal to be nervous. You even *have* to be nervous for a good performance! Do realise that also experienced speakers are nervous. Try to appreciate the state of being nervous as a state of being ready: sharp and focussed.

It is absolutely *not* necessary to be extremely nervous. *You* are the expert on the topic. The audience is there because of interest in your topic, not to tackle you.

You are to create the right atmosphere: a well-prepared presentation shows your respect for the audience and creates the positive, lively atmosphere needed for a fruitful discussion of your results. In contrast, a sloppy, disorderly, indistinct presentation that lasts too long, mainly causes irritation. So if everything is organised well, nothing can go wrong.