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HT @David_Kasten. This was triggered by his X post, which covers some fundamental principles for slide design that I was unaware of. This doc draws upon (but is not limited to) his points here:
https://x.com/David_Kasten/status/2027063865742442521

Best Practices for Academic Presentations

A practical checklist for conference talks, seminar presentations, and research briefings

1. Determine Presentation Type Before You Design

- Default to a structured-argument format for academic presentations (conference papers, seminar talks, thesis defenses, grant briefings).
↳ Analytical presentations prioritise argument clarity over visual design. The hierarchy is: argument structure > data > layout > aesthetics.
- Use a more visual/narrative approach only when the audience and context call for it (e.g., public engagement events, funding pitches to non-specialist panels).
- Know your audience's level of expertise before finalising content depth.
↳ A specialist audience expects technical precision; a mixed audience needs broader framing and less jargon. At international conferences, also avoid idioms and culturally specific humour that may not translate.

2. Slide Titles: Use Action Titles, Not Topic Labels

- Write every slide title as a complete sentence stating the takeaway — the 'so what' — not a topic label.
 - WRONG: "Results" or "Literature Review"
 - RIGHT: "Treatment effect is significant across all three cohorts" or "Prior work leaves the mechanism unexplained"
- Apply the ghost deck test: read only the slide titles in sequence. They should tell the full argument.
↳ This is the single highest-impact formatting principle for academic presentations. If the titles alone do not form a coherent argument, the deck's logic needs repair.
- Keep titles to one or two lines. If a title requires more, the point is not sharp enough.

3. Structure the Argument (Storylining)

- Build slides around a single central argument for the whole presentation.
↳ Researchers frequently try to present too much. Resist the temptation to cover your entire paper or thesis. Choose the aspect that can be conveyed clearly in your allotted time.
- State your central claim or research question early — in the first two or three slides — so the audience knows where they are going.
- Use a proven narrative spine:

- Situation → Complication → Resolution: what was known, what was missing or broken, what your work contributes.
- Or: Broad context → Specific gap → Your approach → Key findings → Implications.
- Each slide should have a single, clearly defined job in the argument. If a slide does two things, split it.
- Use section dividers or a breadcrumb bar (a header strip showing the current section) to help the audience track where they are in the argument.
 - ↳ *Breadcrumbing is particularly valuable for talks longer than 15 minutes. Highlight the current section so the audience can orient themselves at a glance.*
- Check the flow: each slide should make the next one feel like a natural consequence.

4. Exhibit Discipline: One Insight Per Slide

- Show one exhibit per slide — one chart, table, diagram, or equation.
- Every exhibit must directly support the slide's action title. If it does not, revise the title or replace the exhibit.
- Apply the self-sufficient slide test: ask whether the key point is clear even to someone who cannot hear your narration.
 - ↳ *If the answer is no, add a brief annotation, call-out box, or highlighted data point to make the conclusion visible on the slide itself. This is especially important for large rooms where audience members may be far from the screen.*
- Prefer graphs over tables for showing results and trends; tables are harder to parse quickly under time pressure.
- When presenting graphs: place the figure on the left and explanatory text or discussion points on the right, matching the natural left-to-right reading direction.
- Highlight the key finding on the chart directly — use a call-out arrow, colour emphasis, or an annotation box — rather than leaving the audience to locate it themselves.
 - ↳ *This is especially important when under time pressure: tell the audience exactly where to look.*
- Never place decorative icons, stock images, or visual elements on a slide unless they carry analytical content.
- Avoid copying figures directly from your paper; they are often too small or too detailed to read on a projected screen. Rebuild them at presentation resolution.
- Only include an exhibit if you plan to explicitly discuss it. Do not include a figure and then skip over it.

5. Text Discipline: Slides Are Not a Document

- Use complete sentences only in action titles. Body text should be short parallel bullets — one idea each.
- Aim for a maximum of ~40 words of body text per slide. Reserve detail for the appendix.
 - ↳ *If the audience is reading your slide, they are not listening to you. Slides support speech; they do not replace it.*
- Use a single sans-serif font throughout (Arial, Calibri, or Helvetica). Minimum 20pt for body text; 24–28pt for titles; 14pt for citations and footnotes.
- Sentences on slides need not be grammatically complete — omit articles (a, an, the) and filler phrases where the meaning is preserved.

- INSTEAD OF: "Our study found that the intervention reduced costs." USE: "Intervention reduced costs by 23% ($p < 0.01$)"
- Use bold or italics sparingly to highlight key terms. Do not use them for decoration.

6. Design Principles: Communication First

Design should make content easier to read — not more interesting to look at.

- Color:
 - Use a maximum of three colours: one primary, one accent, one for emphasis or alerts.
 - For academic contexts, default to white backgrounds, dark gray text, and one accent colour. Avoid decorative colour gradients.
 - Use colour to direct attention, not for decoration.
- Fonts:
 - One typeface. Use weight (bold/regular) and size for hierarchy — not multiple fonts.
- Alignment:
 - Left-align body text. Centre-align only titles and axis labels.
 - Use a consistent grid. All text boxes and figures should align to the same margins.
- White space is analytical signal, not wasted canvas. Dense slides suggest unclear thinking.
- Use 16:9 (widescreen) format for screen presentations; confirm the venue's aspect ratio in advance.

7. Citations and Attribution (Academic-Specific)

- Cite every claim, figure, and data exhibit that is not your own original work.
↳ Academic integrity norms apply as fully to slides as to papers. Uncited borrowed figures are a plagiarism risk.
- Use in-text citations on slides in your field's standard format:
 - Sciences / social sciences: (Author, Year) parenthetical citations, consistent with APA or your journal style.
 - Humanities: footnote-style or superscript numbers, consistent with Chicago or MLA style.
 - Place in-text citations at the bottom of the relevant slide in a smaller font (around 14pt).
- Include a full References slide at the end of the deck, listing complete citations for all works cited on slides.
- For figures reproduced from another source: include an attribution caption directly beneath the figure, and a full reference on the References slide.
↳ Reproducing a figure from a published paper typically requires permission from the publisher. For conference use, this is often covered by fair use, but check when in doubt.
- Orally introduce sources before citing them: 'Smith et al. (2022) showed that...' rather than quietly flashing a parenthetical.

8. Deck Architecture: Required Slides for Academic Presentations

- Title slide: full title (framed as a statement or question, not just a topic), author name(s) and affiliations, conference/venue, date.

- Motivation / context slide: why does this problem matter? Connect to a real gap or unresolved question in the literature.
- Research question or hypothesis slide: state it precisely and explicitly.
- Methods: keep to 1–2 slides. Focus on what the audience needs to evaluate your findings, not procedural completeness.
↳ Method detail that the audience does not need in order to follow the argument belongs in the appendix, not the main deck.
- Results: one finding per slide; prefer figures over tables; highlight the key result on each chart.
- Discussion / implications: interpret the findings, address their limitations, connect back to the opening research question.
- Conclusions: a single slide restating the 2–3 key takeaways. This slide should stay on screen during Q&A.
↳ Do not replace the conclusions slide with a 'Thank You' or blank slide. Keeping the conclusions visible gives the audience something to anchor questions to.
- References: full citations for all sources cited in the deck.
- Appendix: pre-built slides addressing likely questions, methodological detail, sensitivity analyses, and additional data. Label clearly.

9. Timing and Delivery Preparation

- Budget roughly one slide per minute as a maximum. For a 15-minute slot, plan for 12–14 slides (excluding title and references).
- Practice out loud and to time. Aim to finish 1–2 minutes under your allotted time.
↳ Nerves reliably speed up delivery in the real presentation. A practice run of exactly 15 minutes will likely run over on the day. Going over time is a significant professional misstep at academic conferences — the schedule is planned to the minute.
- Practice in front of another person — ideally both a specialist colleague and someone outside the field.
↳ A non-specialist audience reveals where your argument loses clarity for a broader room. A specialist colleague catches technical gaps.
- Anticipate the 3–5 most likely questions from your audience and pre-build appendix slides that address them.
- At the end, invite feedback specifically — not only questions.
↳ 'Are there questions or feedback?' rather than just 'Any questions?' produces more actionable responses, particularly at conferences where the goal is to improve the work before publication.
- Include your contact information and, increasingly, a QR code or shortened URL linking to your slides or preprint on the final slide.
- Have your presentation available in at least two formats and locations (e.g., USB drive and cloud storage). Many venues do not allow personal laptop connections to the projector system.
- Test the presentation on the actual projection hardware before your session if possible. Colours, fonts, and embedded media frequently render differently on venue equipment.

10. Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Topic labels as titles. Tells the audience nothing. Always use action titles.
- Trying to present the whole paper. Choose one argument and make it well. The rest goes in the appendix.

- Reading the paper aloud. Research papers are not written to be heard. Edit for oral delivery: shorter sentences, repetition of key terms, explicit signposting.
- Evidence without a 'so what'. A chart with no annotation forces the audience to do the interpretive work. Label the finding directly on the figure.
- Uncited borrowed figures and data. Academic integrity applies to slides.
- Dense slides with small text. If someone at the back of the room cannot read it, cut it.
- Inconsistent formatting. Mixed fonts, inconsistent citation styles, and misaligned layouts undermine credibility.
- Putting unreferenced content on a slide. If you include it, discuss it. If you won't discuss it, remove it.
- Going over time. This delays the session, crowds out Q&A (which is a primary purpose of the conference), and signals poor preparation.
- Burying the research question. State it explicitly and early. The audience needs it to evaluate everything that follows.
- Ending on a blank slide or 'Thank You'. End on the conclusions slide so it remains visible throughout the Q&A.

Sources: Naegle KM (2021), "Ten simple rules for effective presentation slides," PLOS Computational Biology; Minto B, The Pyramid Principle; University of Hull Library, Academic Presentations; University of Chicago Graduate Advising, Conference Presentation Tips; Purdue OWL, Conference Presentations; Portland Press / The Biochemist, Beginner's Guide to Conference Presentations; PMC, "Two Minutes More!" (2023); prezentium.com, Scientific Presentation Best Practices; original feedback document (anonymous).