

## A Dozen Slides to Start Your Draft Research Presentation

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Hitting the right notes in a research presentation can be challenging. We've all sat through—and given—presentations with too many PowerPoint slides. Some people prefer Prezi over PowerPoint. Used poorly, however, Prezi can induce motion sickness in audiences and risks getting audiences more excited about creative presentation than the ideas in the presentation. For whatever reason, Prezi and Keynote may have credibility issues with some research communities, and some research communities are devoted to LaTeX for presentations.

Moreover, we've all toyed with the various ways of trying to make long complex theory ideas, long quotable quotes from scholars or field observations, or enormous statistical tables into a single overhead screen. Many of us have also seen the guidelines and op-eds about what a good PowerPoint slide looks like, but few academics have a budget for a designer to really help with graphic elements. Moreover, the presentation of original research (or even proposals for original research) is different from the style and content of presenting with PowerPoint in the corporate world.

So, what is a good starting point for a basic, first draft of a presentation for any circumstance in which you are presenting your own research? What would work across audiences, whether you are presenting to a group of students in a classroom, peer researchers at a conference, prospective colleagues at a job talk, or the public?

A good way to start is by imagining 15 slides. Obviously, the content that goes into this outline will vary, depending on whether you are doing quantitative, comparative, qualitative, or humanistic inquiry. But this outline should be flexible enough to serve you in a 15-minute conference presentation or a substantive 1 hour job talk: the basic goals and ingredients are the same. Indeed, you may find that this outline exposes some of the shared assumption about what “research” can be across the humanities or the natural, physical, and social sciences. Like an essay, there are some standard ingredients that research presentations should have. Some disciplines have their own conventions, and your mentors should coach you on what these are. But not having the basic ingredients risks communicating that you have not been fully professionalized as a researcher.

### LESS IS MORE NORM

There is an adage that good data visualizations have a low ink to data ratio. You want every drop of ink to communicate something meaningful, and any bedazzling colours or animations detract from what you want to communicate. So, for presentations, think about a low pixel to data ratio. If the pixel is communicating something that you will be saying out loud during the presentation, the pixel may be redundant. If the pixel is communicating nothing relevant, clear it out. And Orwell's writing rules apply to presentations as well:



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- (i) Don't use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- (ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- (iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- (iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- (v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- (vi) Break any of these rules sooner than present anything outright barbarous.

Practically speaking, this means it is okay for you to edit quotes and use ellipses or hard brackets as necessary. It is okay to just present part of a model, no need to put the variables you aren't going to discuss up on the screen, just mention in passing that they were part of the analysis (people will understand that you can return to them in Q&A).

### IT IS A PERFORMANCE

This is just an outline structure. The design elements are up to you and as is the performance. If you use a laser slide pointer, hold it in your hand and rest your hand on the corner of the podium so the red dot looks stable on the screen. Trace lines slowly on the screen: from the audience point of view, a quick jittery slash of laser across the screen just makes you look nervous.

Minimize the animations and don't embed video—they break the audience's attention from you. Soft gentle fade-ins look good; fast moving swiping transitions with silly sound effects are distracting. If you are studying visual culture and are analysing a single, important video artefact, it might be ok to stop your formal presentation and let the audience watch the object of your inquiry. But inserting YouTube joke videos, excerpts from other people's lectures, or recordings from field site means you are surrendering the attention. Unless you do a full setup and then analysis of an embedded video it is rarely worth jarring your audience and giving up the minutes you must present your ideas...and you risk that the audience will fixate on the video and interpret it in unexpected ways.

Use one or two slides that are just a picture—the kind of picture that is provocative and can trigger a whole slew of thoughts from you. An image that helps prompt you in some way that the audience will remember. As a presenter, this should let you get animated and let the audience see that you can eloquently riff on your research.

Use one or two slides that are just text. Big text so that people can read with you, and it's ok if you read the text out loud. Choose the well-phrased lines from your writing that have precisely chosen words and bring home a punch line. Use this presentation style sparingly. As a presenter, this should let you hammer home the most important point of your research, using the crafted language that communicates the key thing you want to communicate. Again, these should be the ideas you don't want your audience to misinterpret.

### PLAY WITH OUTLINE AFTER EACH PERFORMANCE

Over the long term, your slide deck can include other slides that you have in waiting should you need more content either to help answer audience questions or fill in the time. Indeed,

the more you practice, the better able you will be to collapse or stretch your presentation of your ideas. So, if you ever design a good slide but decide there may not be enough time for it, don't delete it just move it to the very bottom where you can put it up if needed during the Q&A.

Once you are practiced with this slide show, you will also feel comfortable introducing your own variations. But it is good to start with this outline. Since the slides described above are also the common components of research projects across the disciplines if you drop one in a presentation to a scholarly audience someone will probably query you about it!

## STARTER OUTLINE

**SLIDE 1 TITLE:** Snappy title, substantive sub-title. Date, your name, email address, department, and university affiliation. Perhaps the logo of your home institution and your funder if relevant. This should be up first, as people ready settle in for your brilliant talk. Always introduce yourself, welcome people and thank your hosts—even if your host has just done some of that work—and don't just launch into your material!

**SLIDE 2 OUTLINE:** Tell us what's ahead with an outline. Make sure the section titles in the outline appear in the same phrasing later so that the audience can track where you are. Roman numerals can signal progress in the argument, and some people put a "running header" on slides along with slide number. You don't need the date, your name, or your institution's name on every slide...those pixels are redundant after your first slide and introducing yourself!

**SLIDE 3 ABOUT ME:** Give us a few quick reminders about who you are, who you've collaborated with, how you came to (or fell into) this topic, or why you are personally invested in this research. If you are proud of having received some financial support for the research or are proud of having made it through the human subjects' approval process, some of those details can appear on the slide. This slide helps people locate your research in the community network of funders, research centres, and other scholars involved in this area of inquiry. This slide also establishes your credibility and teaches the audience about your interests. You can also discuss a previous paper or previous project, which would build a bridge to the next slide. While the slide can identify your formal ties to the research community, this can also be the moment to take people behind the stage and tell them the personal compelling story that really drew you into the project.

**SLIDE 4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS:** This slide should clearly state the research questions. Some people, especially those doing comparative or quantitative research, may also have working hypotheses. But all of us have research questions. Moreover, this slide will get lots of editing over time as you come across better words to substitute in and as your research agenda evolves. Ideally your research interests can be expressed several ways: first through a big picture research question that will be abstract and general, broadly appealing even and understandable for people who aren't experts in your subfield or who are interested in your theory ideas but not really your specific case study or research domain; second through a more focused question that is specific to your period of inquiry, your case study, your population, your sample, or your artefact. For example, this might be the difference between "What does the concentration of technology innovation mean for democracy?"

and “What were the causes and consequences of the concentration of technology innovation in Silicon Valley for the democratic institutions between 1990 and 2019?” While this slide is up, you also have a unique opportunity to intrigue the audience with a weird problem, a perplexing quote, a puzzling situation. The details of the narrative don’t need to go on the slide, you entrance us with an oxymoron, riddle, or highly problematic quote from your text or your fieldwork. Or an unresolved question that your peers have missed. It should be something that will make someone in the audience heckle “no!” or “neat!”.

**SLIDE 5 AND 6 LITERATURE REVIEW:** In these two slides you present the ways in which other contemporary researchers would tackle your research questions, solve your puzzle, or deconstruct your artefact. These slides show the audience that you are on top of the literature, and that you have done due diligence in assessing other schools of thought and familiarized yourself with other people’s critiques. Convince us that you know what the existing research is, but don’t go overboard. Don’t dwell on the literature review, just convince us that you know it and if any of the important researchers are in the audience this is an opportunity to quickly acknowledge their contributions. This may vary a bit in the humanities, but overall, the audience is not at your research talk to hear about Habermas, Foucault, Bourdieu, Castells, Einstein, or Dawkins, they are there to learn about your work. (Yes, okay if your work is on their work you can refer to big names but spending time on other people’s ideas means less time on your ideas.) Slide 5 should be about what the leading brand name scholars might say on your research question. Slide 6 should be about what others might say—either some dissenters or some people who recently and directly tried to answer your research question.

**SLIDE 7 POSSIBLE ANSWERS AND RIVAL THEORIES:** In this slide you summarize three different yet plausible answers to your research question. You transition from theorizing about how other thinkers might answer your question to the most plausible answers. Of course, refer to the literature and scholars you assessed, and perhaps summarize two rival explanations and suggest that you have a third, better, more nuanced answer. This is the bridge to the next series of slides, and it shows that you have identified a puzzle that current scholarship can’t solve or doesn’t handle well, and that you feel confident enough about your solution and handling of the puzzle to warrant presenting your work. If some of the people behind the rival theories are in the audience, be respectful.

**SLIDE 8 MY METHODS:** Slide 8 should be about methods choices. Say things like “to complete this research I have spent [X years of my life] doing [fieldwork / lab work / archival work / statistical analysis]. I have travelled to [these cities or libraries], interviewed [X number of experts], created [original datasets / original compositions / original artwork].” Detail your research process, especially if the audience is full of researchers. Impress the audience with the volume of artefacts you’ve studied, number people you’ve talked to, time you have dedicated or places you’ve been. By now, you are one of the world’s experts on your research domain, so describe all the evidence you’ve been working on and the kinds of intellectual work you’ve put into becoming this expert.

**SLIDES 9 AND 10:** Your more nuanced understanding of the problem at hand is based on your expertise: your fieldwork, your considered assessment of a media text, your collection and assessment of data, or your cross-case comparison. You get to justify your

methodological and epistemological approach and do your reading of evidence. There is a lot of variety about what can go in these slides, but they can be dedicated to you and your project. These slides can be about findings your specific field site, artefact, or data analysis. In other words, they should be the answers you would offer to your second very specific research question.

**SLIDE 11 CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS:** In this slide you can suggest that more work is needed in this domain. Perhaps there are some remaining aspects of the research question that you couldn't quite get to, or something about your sampling strategy that might have biased the outcomes. Perhaps your conclusions lead inexorably to more questions, and you could identify some of these...especially if your intention is to go on with this or if you want to influence the trajectory of other researchers in the room. This penultimate slide allows you to answer the big picture question, and it should summarize the takeaway ideas that will interest even people who don't care about your case study. They can be simply stated, but like your slide of research questions, will take a lot of drafting and redrafting. Indeed, you may rephrase your conclusions the night before a presentation, to highlight conclusions you expect your audience will be particularly interested in. This is where you can say big things about the intellectual merit or broad impact of your work. What are take-away ideas one, two and three?

**SLIDE 12 REFERENCES:** This isn't about referencing other people's work; it is about your work, and it should identify some of the writing you've done in this domain. It doesn't only have to list published items, it can list works that are working papers, co-authored articles, or manuscripts that are forthcoming, under review, or in preparation. It is great if you have an authored or co-authored piece on the topic you are presenting on. But when most of us are presenting new research, it hasn't come out in print, so if your references are relevant to the research they should be identified here. If you haven't published, then perhaps list your team members, and move the funder information from the early slide to this slide. Repeat your identifying information from the first slide, and then list two or three items or the URL of a website where people could find out more about your work. This slide can stay up during the question-and-answer period, and it is much better than a final slide that says "good-bye", "thank you", or worse, "fin".