

Presentation Tips **Arun Thottumkara**

Congratulations for submitting a research project to the Illinois Junior Science and Humanities Symposium. Completing any significant research endeavor is a feat in itself and you should be proud of your accomplishment.

For those of you who are presenting at the competition please be sure to read the other sections in the “Tips” part of the webpage—they are very informative and quite helpful. Below you’ll find a few tips that I hope will be helpful if you are presenting a paper; they should also be useful for poster presenters or anyone who is thinking about submitting projects in the future.

On Slide Layout

Use Microsoft Powerpoint to make your presentation; it is much easier to use than any other presentation format. The main thing to keep in mind when you’re making your presentation is that the presentation is supposed to showcase your work and your knowledge about your given topic. Therefore stay away from fancy designs or elaborate formatting schemes. This includes complex backgrounds, sounds, or animation on each slide or between slides. While it may be fun to make those presentations, it really will distract the audience from the actual “bulk” of the research material. My suggestion is to stay with light background colors with strong colors for words and figures (dark blue or red for example).

Depending on your project, the style of your presentation will differ significantly. However, a general rule for all presentations is to keep the amount of text on your slides at a minimum. Use figures, diagrams, and tables as much as possible. This is a scientific presentation and the audience is truly interested in what you have to *say* about your work. This is NOT at all to say that text in a presentation is not necessary; however simply keep in mind that the best presentations are usually those that use text as sparingly and effectively as possible.

On Preparation

The best way to prepare for the IJSHS (or any other research presentation for that matter) is to practice a lot at home. Prepare your slides and speech at least a few weeks

before the competition and try to practice as much as you can. If you are involved with a science club at your high school, ask your science club sponsor/teacher if you could arrange a meeting for the science club during which you can present your speech to the other members of the science club. Get their feedback about your presentation style, points that you could clarify in your speech, and possibly have them ask you questions as a “mock” question-and-answer session.

DO NOT worry about “messaging up” when you first begin practicing your speech; the more you practice, the more you become familiar and able to give your presentation confidently.

Along with preparing the actual presentation, please make sure to review your own data and work as well as related topics. While the judges are interested in how well you can present, they are also keenly interested in seeing the range and scope of your knowledge on your research topic. They will also be looking for how well you can make informed and critical assessments of various scientific problems that relate to your research project—an aspect that will become apparent in the question-and-answer session. If you have access to scientific journals, try to read up on some recent research related to your project. It is always helpful to know other things that are going on in your field. If you don't understand a certain idea or concept related to your project, seek help. Consult your science teachers or even contact university professors. They are usually more than willing to help out and clarify any doubts you have.

On actually presenting

Don't panic. It might seem daunting at first to stand up in front of a large audience and give a well-informed and lucid scientific presentation, but the more you practice your presentation the more you will realize that you are completely comfortable giving a speech to an audience of any size. I've heard a lot of people talk about different techniques that they use to become less nervous; the classic one is to imagine everyone in their underwear. If techniques like these work for you, then use it. However, keep in mind that, rationally, there is nothing that you need to worry about. You've done the research, you've written the paper, and you've prepared as best you can. Therefore, all you can do while you're on stage is to be confident and proud of your work and your presentation. Those twelve minutes are your time to show the judges and the rest of the

audience what you've done and what you know. If you're afraid that the judges don't appreciate your work or you feel as if they might be intimidating, realize that all of the judges at IJSHS, and at Nationals as well, have immense respect for anyone who takes it upon themselves to passionately investigate a scientific problem and then report their results. Just like you respect them, they respect you.

Try not to use too many or any notecards during your presentation. While they are undoubtedly useful in remembering what your next sentence is, all too often people tend to write too much on their notecards and simply read off of the notecards during the presentation. Use your slides as your outline and use it to help you keep track of where you are in your presentation. Also, the main rules of making a presentation in class apply to this type of presentation format: eye contact with the audience, loud and clear voices, etc.

One thing also to remember is that the panel of judges (and the audience for that matter) will have a wide field of expertise; not everyone will be professional fluent in your field. Therefore, it is very important to try to make your presentation as comprehensible as possible. This involves staying away from very technical vocabulary and detailed experimental procedures. If you can generalize your presentation such that it retains its scientific merit but at the same time can be understandable to non-experts, that is the best route to go.

On the question and answer section

The judges do NOT try to make you look foolish in front of the audience. One of the common misconceptions among presenters is that the judges will ask questions designed to "stump" you. This is not at all the case. While the questions that you receive from judges will certainly be challenging, they are designed to test how well you know your own data and how well you are able to apply scientific evidence to various scientific problems.

Do not jump into answering a question. Please take time to consider what the question is asking and how what you've learned is applicable to the question at hand. Also, if you do not know the answer to a question it is perfectly alright to answer "I do not know the specific answer to your question." However, even if you do not know the

answer to a question, if you could, try to provide some information that is possibly related to the question.

If you do not understand a question immediately, ask if the questioner could possibly clarify his/her question. You are not expected to understand or know everything and therefore it is absolutely fine if you are initially confused by a question.

Moreover, remember to repeat the question. Not only is it a rule of the symposium, it also is helpful to other people in the audience who were not able to hear the question the first time.

I hope these tips are helpful for you. Best of luck in the competition and in your future studies.
