

## Things I hate in other people's seminars

At the recent IEEE Conference on Decision and Control in Kobe, I used the opportunity of chairing two sessions to begin to write down the acts of speakers which particularly annoyed me. This annoyance was fuelled by the fact that the speakers clearly considered their presentation as therapy for themselves rather than a communications exercise with the audience. I thought that by sharing such a list, we might all focus more carefully on our own foibles that inhibit clear communication in seminars and conferences.

It must be said that this awareness of other people's problems comes only partly from having sat through huge numbers of conference presentations. Mostly, I have first hand experience, that is it is my own behaviour which is being deconstructed in examining the presenters at conferences. My hope is that, by studying explicitly what we find objectionable, we can consciously lift our performance.

Here's my list.

### Slides — physically speaking

**Portrait slides** — the geometry of projectors forces key-holing and focus problems from top to bottom that are trivially avoided by landscape slides.

**Inappropriate slide covers** — using greying, textured slide covers useful for documents but entirely inappropriate for transparencies. 3M brand slide covers work well and cost about \$3 each. There is no cheap solution to being professional.

**Failure to remove backing sheets** — folding, bending, sliding, manipulating, repositioning slides which otherwise (had the backing sheet been pulled off) would have happily remained on top of the projector.

**Seriously recycled slides** — slides with grubby handmarks, additional hand writing in texta over the lovely printing. Sometimes you see extraneous material *"Please ignore the reference to Riccati equations. That was for another talk."*

**Raw Slitex** — It's just sooo boring. At least add some coloured handwritten doodles. Underline in colour. Draw a picture. Add a border.

**Too many slides, poor timing** — It is just not possible to fit in 35 slides into a 15 minute talk. If you run out of time, stop early. The audience has a nonlinear channel capacity. Increasing the bit rate causes a bit error rate *exceeding* 0.5.

### Slides — contents and malcontents

**Cross-slide references** — *"Equation (4) three slides ago defined the constant  $\gamma$  ..."*

**Numbered citations** — *"... as was proven in [6]."* If we wanted to read the paper we could have better spent the seminar time doing just that.

**Just part of the global slide** — incomplete sentence at the end of slide  $x$  is completed at the top of slide  $x + 1$ .

**Symbols defined elsewhere** —  $\Lambda$  is the step-size parameter of the conjugate gradient algorithm used by Strang.

**Undefined acronyms** — TPBVP, what does that mean?

**Absence of punch-line conclusion** — *"Just ran out of time. Might as well stop there. Are there any questions?"*

**Proofs** — all proofs by any person, almost no exceptions other than Fermat.

## Presentation

**Laser pointers** — all laser pointers operated by any person, no exceptions whatsoever.

**Slide striptease** — hiding and revealing parts of slides is infuriating. Most of the time the presenter complains that it is difficult to get enough on one slide. So why cover the thing up? In some circumstances, such titillating, teasing activities are quite enticing. In a seminar, where the best you can hope for is a new theorem and the drink/cigarette afterwards is truly the highlight, don't play this game.

**Clumsy pointer syndrome** — use the pointer to point, not to support yourself in a pirouette, not to exercise your thumbs, not to point to the projector.

**Obscuring the screen** — Why do so many people insist on pointing at the top of the projector? This causes the light to shine up their sleeve and onto their shoulder. If you insist on doing this, then wear a white shirt and refocus the projector onto yourself. Alternatively, never point to anything but the screen.

**Slide gymnastics** — keep the slides in a convenient location. Shift the furniture if necessary, but don't spend your time picking up slides that have slid (no wonder they are called slides) off the chair onto the floor.

**Microphone mismanagement** — turning away from the microphone while speaking (to point to the screen for example) causes enormous changes in volume. Bumping the microphone or having it in a mostly unreachable place also add to annoyance and distraction. With so-called Lapel Mikes, NEVER put them on your lapel. They must go directly beneath your mouth. This is the reason (and the only reason) why God invented neck ties. Women, wear a tie or at least a substantial blouse with a button-up front when speaking, to support the mike.

**Real-time slide selection** — *“I just have a pile of 460 slides from my spring semester graduate course ‘Optimal Control: a postmodern perspective’ and I thought that I should show you some of that.”*

## Serial killers

When delivering a 15 minute seminar presentation, you have serious constraints compared to a written research paper.

- Your material must be presented seriatim, i.e. the inexorable passage of time prevents people from looking back to check definitions, equations, results etc. You cannot afford to assume that your audience has understood everything just because you said it.
- Your time is limited. (Thank heavens!)
- The audience's attention span is even more limited and they have been listening to four and a half days of this stuff before you got up.
- As much as you would like them to, nobody is going to follow your proof. The fact that it took you two years to perfect does not imbue the proof with universal interest. If the proof is so interesting then what does that say about the result?

Given this picture, why is it that so many people choose to present their seminars just like research papers? Why not start with the major, important outcomes, then go back to develop the techniques and applications? Mix the styles up a little. Give yourself a number of break points where you can stop. By getting the big message off early, you can relax a little.