Some tips for giving a good philosophy presentation

This document offers tips, not commandments. Every presentation is different and should be adjusted to context, occasion, personal preferences, etc. Who's the audience (students, conference participants, colleagues, etc.)? What's the time frame (1-minute elevator pitch vs. 45-minute conference talk)? What is being presented (seminar work, work in progress, thesis defence)? Who is presenting (individual or group)? And so on. There is no one-size-fits-all recipe for all presentations and presenters. Also, presenting is an experimental process. You should try out different styles and techniques to find out what works well for you and what does not.

Therefore, feel free to adjust the tips offered below to your individual needs and preferences. Every presentation is and ought to be different.

Content

The point of a presentation is never to just repeat what others have already said on the topic. Every presentation should make an original contribution of some sort or other.

Don't cover too much. Focus on your key message or the key points you want to get across. Organize your talk around this key message/these key points. When you're asked 'What are you going to do in your talk?', you should be able to give a precise and concise answer along the lines of 'I will argue that x.', 'There are three points I want to make, namely x, y, and z.', 'I want to show that we can gain a new perspective on the topic by looking at it through the lens of x.', or something of this sort. It should not be 'I'm going to say all sorts of things about x.'

Know your audience. If your audience is familiar with the topic (say, because it's your classmates who have done the assigned readings), cut down on introductory stuff. If your audience is not familiar with the topic, make sure to provide some context and background information to avoid losing your audience.

Structure

Just like a philosophical essay, a philosophical presentation should have clear structure. It should consist of an introduction, a main body, and a conclusion. Usually, you shouldn't spend more than 25 % of your time on introduction and conclusion combined.

Make sure to stay within the time limit. 'I wish the talk had been longer' said no one ever. You can avoid overrunning by practicing your presentation in advance and timing it. Of course, giving a presentation is not an exact science. It is close to impossible to speak for exactly the amount of time you've been allotted. But try to aim for no more than a 15 % deviation from the allotted time in either direction (e.g. allotted time: 20 minutes => try to remain within 17 to 23 minutes of speaking time).

The introduction

When you're giving a presentation, at least some of your audience will be thinking 'What am I doing here? Why should I listen to this person talk about x rather than watch Netflix?' Even when your actual

audience is more charitable, it can be helpful to imagine that there are people in the audience thinking exactly this. The answer, of course, is: because you have got something really important/interesting to say about a really important/interesting topic. This is what you should try to get across in the introduction.

Therefore, don't just state the topic of your presentation ('Today, I'll be talking to you about topic *x*. Here's the structure of my presentation...'). Give your audience an idea of how and why topic *x* is important, e.g. by providing some context/examples/etc. Also, give them an idea of how your presentation will contribute to a better understanding of the topic. E.g., tell them that you will focus on some neglected aspects of this topic, that you will approach the topic from a new perspective, that you will challenge some conventional wisdom about the topic, etc. When you're giving a talk in which you advance just one philosophical thesis, it is usually a good idea to state this thesis in your introduction.

Typically, then, the introduction should include (not necessarily in this order):

1) a statement of the topic of the presentation,
2) an explanation of why the topic is important,
3) a brief anticipation of what your unique contribution is going to be,
4) a map of the structure of your presentation.

If your presentation is brief, the introduction should also be brief. But even a brief introduction should normally cover these four things, however succinctly (maybe just one sentence).

Main body

Whatever it is you want to get across in your presentation, this is where you should do it. Usually, the main part should itself be structured. For instance, if you've got three important messages you want to get across, you might want to split up the main body of your talk into three subsections (duh!).

This part of your talk is both the longest and the most difficult to follow. It is also where your audience's attention might start to fade. Having a clear structure and a clear vision of what it is you want to get across is therefore key. Do some signposting, e.g. by announcing when you move from one subsection/aspect/point to the next, to make sure everyone knows what is going on.

Conclusion

Things you *should* do in a conclusion:

- *Briefly* summarize the most important points/findings. In the introduction, you effectively promised that you are going to say something interesting about an important topic. The conclusion is where you can remind the audience that you've made good on your promise. Remember that people's attention span is short. The longer your presentation, the more likely people will have lost track of all the important and interesting stuff you said in the course of your presentation. Use the conclusion to succinctly highlight the most important findings/take aways.

Things you *can* do in a conclusion:

- Provide some additional context. What are the broader implications of your findings?

- Mention some open questions, which you did not have the time to address in your presentation.
- If your presentation is supposed to lead to a structured discussion that you're chairing, raise some possible discussion questions. *[relevant for this course]*

Things you should *not* do in a conclusion:

- Don't put the important stuff in the conclusion. If the point of your presentation is to cast a new light on *w*, to argue that *x,* to explore whether *y*, to challenge the notion that *z*, etc., then this should be happening in the main part of your presentation, never in the conclusion.

Slides (possibly optional)

You are the protagonist of your presentation, not your slide deck. The audience's primary attention should be on you, not on your slides. Spending 30 minutes or more staring at slides crammed with philosophy stuff is nobody's idea of a good time, no matter how well-crafted the slides are or how much the audience loves philosophy. If you want to keep the audience awake and engaged, you must get them to listen to *you* giving a presentation *with the aid* of some slides

Don't put too much text on your slides. People can't listen and read at the same time. The more they are busy reading slides, the less they are listening to you. One way of reducing text is to use images, symbols, charts, diagrams, etc. The possibility to visualize stuff in non-verbal terms is *the* competitive advantage that slides offer over purely verbal presentation. Make use of it!

When you're done preparing your slides, go through them and ask for every bit of text:

- Does this really need to be written down? How does putting this down on a slide help me get my message across?
- Can I make this shorter, e.g. by replacing a long sentence with a short one or even with just one key word?
- Can I use an image/symbol/etc. instead of text?

sample slide 1

Which of the two sample slides is better at keeping the audience engaged and helping the presenter convey the key message? Which slide would *you* prefer to look at? Which slide makes it easier to cognitively process and retain the information?

Slide 1 contains a lot of text, including a lot of less important stuff that need not be written down. Slide 2 focuses just on the two powerful quotes, which capture the essence of all the stuff said on slide

sample slide 2

1. Slide 1 contains so much text that it is going to absorb much of the audience's attention and overpower the presenter. Slide 2, being more minimalistic, will *support* the presenter in making her point without overpowering her. Also, images are fun to look at 😊

Side note (or maybe side question?): When slides are intended as learning material (e.g. lecture slides), filling them with lots of text and detail might be a good thing (?). But this is an exception!

Delivery

Giving a talk has many advantages over expressing the same ideas in a written text. In particular, a talk can be a lot more *engaging* than a written text. You can make use of these advantages, e.g., by:

- not reading your presentation from a pre-prepared script. To cope with nervousness, you may learn the first couple of sentences of your talk by heart and memorise important aspects of the other slides.
- using body language. Try to make eye contact with your audience, use arms and hands to emphasize what you're saying, put on a friendly face (even if you wish you didn't have to give this talk 😉). Avoid crossed arms, hands behind your back, or in your pockets.
- effectively using your voice. Vary pitch, strength and speed at which you speak to emphasize and de-emphasize parts of your presentation (and to make sure that nobody's falling asleep 😉). Make pauses after important points, to give your message a chance to stick and to allow you to take a deep breath.
- consider recording your practice talk to put yourself in the shoes of the audience and to find ways how you might improve your delivery.

Nervous?

Everyone is nervous when presenting, even experienced public speakers. But there are strategies that can help you cope with stage fright.

1) Don't think of giving a presentation as an exam situation. It's not you *against* the audience. Rather, try to think of yourself and the audience as *on the same team*. You are in this together with the audience. Sometimes, it helps to make this explicit by involving the audience in one way or other. For instance, you might use language that includes the audience ("What I want to do *with you* today is look at...", "One question *you* might have at this stage is...", etc.). The more you connect with your audience and break down the barrier between you and them, the less it will feel like an exam situation and the more it will feel like a relaxed conversation.

2) Don't try to actively fight acute nervousness. It won't work and will just make things worse. Instead, when you notice nervousness before or during your presentation, simply acknowledge it and accept it as something normal and to be expected. As speech coach Matt Abrahams suggests, you should 'greet your anxiety' and say 'Hey, this is me feeling nervous. It's normal and natural' (https://youtu.be/S1IaLvRYBnw?t=417). Sounds weird, but works a lot better than freaking out about being nervous. You should also check out his other material.

3) Practice your presentation *a lot*. The more you practice, the more confident you will be. Practice the first 1-2 minutes the most. If the first couple of minutes go well, you'll get a confidence boost that will carry you through the rest of your presentation. It's also a good idea to practice transitions between sections/slides.

Two meta-tips

1) Treat any presentation you're listening to as an opportunity to improve *your* presentation skills. Pay attention to what you like about the presentation. Which presenting style captures you attention? What kind of slides do you find engaging? Then go and copy it. You can also use YouTube for this. Listen to recorded talks online (academic talks, TedEx talks, lectures, etc.) and ask yourself what you like and don't like about them.

2) We are *all* rather unaccomplished presenters. Learning to give a good presentation is not like learning to make a good bolognese (vegan, of course), which you can master in just a few attempts. It's more like learning a foreign language. We can get better at it, but the learning process is arduous and it never stops. Think of every presentation you're giving as an opportunity to get *a bit better* at this. Don't beat yourself up for not giving a perfect presentation.

Still questions?

Here's another great guideline: http://www.koksvik.net/talk.php

Check out Matt Abrahams' material on public speaking:
https://www.youtube.com/user/NoFreakingSpeaking

Any suggestions how to improve this guideline? Disagree with any of the above? Let me know: p.j.konigs@uu.nl