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What do conference attendees want from academic presentations? A study of an information systems professional organization

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Abstract

Research presentations are a staple activity for academic professionals. Each year, academics travel all over the world to attend academic conferences. They share in-progress and finished research, gather ideas about potential research ideas, and network with other academics. Over the course of a conference, many presentations will be given in various categories and conference themes. Some presentations inspire audiences and others disappoint them. This paper identifies what academic conference attendees in the Information Systems (IS) field consider to be attributes of successful and unsuccessful academic presentations. Based on a mixed-method survey of 65 IS professors, this paper addresses IS scholars' motivations for attending conferences, their preparation for and anxiety in creating and delivering presentations, and their expectations for academic presentations. Results are compared between the two major attendee types: networkers and focused attendees. Recommendations are provided for academic conference presenters.

Keywords: academic presentations, academic conferences, presentations

Introduction

Academic conferences provide scholars with unique opportunities to share their own research and learn from others. The investment in time and money is significant. Academic presentations tend to be the primary means of disseminating information at academic conferences, yet little attention has been paid to identifying what conference goers value the most. In fact, we're not aware of any published research that has explored what conference attendees expect from presentations. The purpose of this paper is to present what members of an information systems professional organization value most in academic presentations so that presenters can plan their presentations more effectively.

Literature Review

Little scholarly research is available about the nature and effectiveness of academic presentations. Scholars suggest academic presentations are a unique but underexplored genre (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005; Viera, 2020). In examining the introductions of academic presentations, Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas found that effective presenters only briefly discuss the background (i.e., literature review) and rather focus more extensively on the "novelties and results" (p. 64). A few scholars have offered advice about presentations in editorial-style journal publications. For example, Smith and Salmond (2011) explained how to present effectively at academic conferences in political science. Their recommendations emerged from many years of observing that the top conference in their field was beset by poor presentations.

Overall, they explain, "We argue that current presentational norms in our discipline are counterproductive, and we encourage presenters to make their presentations more constrained, less technical, and more connected [to the outside world]" (p. 583). They share the following common failures they have observed in academic presentations: irrelevant information (off topic), too much time spent on literature reviews, convoluted conclusions, excessively technical details and jargon, poor slides, taking too much time, and not respecting time limits. They give several key pieces of advice: (1) keep it simple; (2) allocate time wisely and choose just "one element of the paper that they believe will generate the best audience reaction" (p. 586); (3) deliver the presentation to "engage the minds of the audience" (p. 586) so the audience can "see the story" of the paper; and (4) generously and graciously field questions. They explain:

> Not only will a conference presentation leave out many parts of a paper, it may also have a different structure. The most important question to answer in a presentation is: "How does this research take the literature somewhere new, interesting, and important?" This question will involve many different strands of the paper, and the paper itself will often answer it in a very diffuse way. A presentation, however, must address this issue concisely, in plain English, and from the outset: Why does this paper matter? (p. 586)

Most advice about presenting at academic conferences emerges from university workshops (e.g., Davidson, n.d.; Weber, n.d.) and publishers to the higher education community (e.g., Golash-Boza, 2018; Gold, 2019). Common advice generally focuses on clarity and conciseness, audience engagement, brief backgrounds of theory and literature with more emphasis on key results and contributions of the present study, slide design with concise text and visual attractiveness, professionalism in dress and speech, eye contact with the audience during the presentation, speaking with passion, and respect for time limits. For the most part, the advice is similar to that given in books and articles about effective presentations (e.g., Anderson, 2013; Duarte, 2012). Yet, some of these advice givers emphasize the unique academic structure of presentations that should include the standard components of an academic paper: introduction, theoretical framework/literature review, methodology, results, and conclusions (Golash-Boza, 2018). Still, no known studies examine what conference attendees expect out of academic presentations.

Methodology

The purpose of this research is to identify the expectations for academic presentations based on the views of conference attendees. To our knowledge, no such work exists. This research addresses several research questions: (1) What are the primary reasons for attending academic conferences? (2) How do academic presenters prepare for their presentations? (3) What expectations do conference goers hold for academic presentations? (4) In what ways do motivations to attend conferences influence expectations for academic presentations. The survey was developed with items emerging from the few articles about academic presentations (Golash-Boza, 2018, Gold, 2019, Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005; Smith & Salmond, 2011). Survey items focused on (a) the reasons conference goers attend conferences; (b) their own preparation for academic presentations; and (c) their expectations for academic presentations.

The survey was sent to past conference presenters during the past five years at the International Association of Computer Information Systems (IACIS). IACIS serves as an important case of expectations for academic presentations. This organization actively promotes research and pedagogical tracks for its conferences, thus drawing scholars who prioritize thought leadership *and* student learning. The survey was sent to 310 past presenters with 65 responses. The survey occurred in April 2021.

The survey was completed by 65 respondents. There were 41 men (63.1 percent), 20 women (30.8 percent), and 2 others who preferred not to say (3.1 percent). One respondent (1.6 percent) was between 18 and 29

years old; 1 respondent (1.6 percent) was 25 to 34 years old; 15 (23.8 percent) were 35 to 44 years old; 23 (36.5 percent) were 45 to 54 years old; 14 (22.2 percent) were 55 to 64 years old; and 9 (14.3 percent) were over 65 years old. For conference attendance, 12 respondents (18.5 percent) had attended 5 or fewer academic conferences; 11 (16.9 percent) had attended 6 to 10 conferences; 12 (18.5 percent) had attended 11 to 20 conferences; and 30 (46.2 percent) had attended 21 or more conferences. For conference attendance funding through the attendee's institution, 14 respondents (21.5 percent) indicated they received no funding or only partial funding for a single conference each year; 34 (52.3 percent) indicated they received full funding for just one conference per year; 13 (20 percent) indicated they received full funding for two conferences per year; and 4 (6.2 percent) indicated they received full funding for 3 or more conferences per year.

Results

We group our findings into the following areas: motivations to attend academic conferences, preparation for conferences, and expectations for conference presentations. We begin with motivations to attend academic conferences because it highlights the overall priorities of audiences and allows us to differentiate the needs of various conference goers. Specifically, we identify two types of conference goers and how their expectations align and vary with one another.

Motivations to Attend Academic Conferences

Our findings show that learning about new research in the field and gaining teaching ideas are the most important reasons to attend conferences (see Table 1). Gaining recognition for an academic paper is important to most conference goers but gaining recognition for an academic presentation is less valued. Networking—including meeting new people in the field, spending time with friends and colleagues, and finding collaboration partners—is considered a primary goal by roughly half of the respondents. Travel and leisure are important to just under half of the respondents.

Table 1. Reasons for Attending Academic Conferences.

Survey Item	*M*	*SD*	% Agree
Learn about new research in the field	6.02	1.07	67.7
Gain new teaching ideas	5.74	1.35	73.8
Gain recognition (credit) from my school for an academic paper	5.57	1.58	61.5
Meet new people in the field	5.52	1.25	57.8
Spend time with friends and colleagues	5.38	1.74	55.4
Find collaboration partners	5.34	1.17	45.4
Gain recognition (credit) from my school for an academic presentation	5.23	1.60	46.2
Travel and leisure	4.77	1.73	40.0

Note. N = 65. Scale for these items was 1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree. *% Agree* refers to percentage of respondents who selected "agree" or "strongly agree."

Based on a K-means cluster analysis to categorize conference goers, we identified two groups: *networkers* (n = 38) and *focused attendees* (n = 25). A t-test analysis of the two groups shows some significant differences between them in terms of reasons for attending conferences: learning about new research in the field ($M^{networkers}$=5.95, $M^{focused}$=6.12, t=.65, p=.52), gain new teaching ideas ($M^{networkers}$=5.84, $M^{focused}$=5.52, t=-.86, p=.39), gain recognition from my school for an academic paper ($M^{networkers}$=5.53, $M^{focused}$=5.72, t=.47, p= .64), meet new people in the field ($M^{networkers}$=6.18, $M^{focused}$=4.52, t=-6.75, p<.001**), spend time with friends and colleagues ($M^{networkers}$=6.45, $M^{focused}$=3.72, t=-.934, p<.001**), find collaboration partners

($M^{networkers}$=5.84, $M^{focused}$=4.60, t=-.4.74, p<.001**), gain recognition from my school for an academic presentation ($M^{networkers}$=5.21, $M^{focused}$=5.36, t=.36, p=.72), and travel and leisure ($M^{networkers}$=5.45, $M^{focused}$=3.76, t=-4.27, p<.001**). On the whole, networkers appear to prioritize networking as much as learning about new research and teaching ideas. Focused attendees, on the other hand, highly prioritize learning about new research and teaching ideas, with far less interest in networking. Similarly, networkers are much more interested in the travel and leisure aspect of conferences than are focused attendees.

Preparation and Anxiety for Academic Presentations

We asked respondents about how they prepared for presentations as well as how much anxiety they feel. When asked *How soon before your conference presentation are you mostly prepared to deliver the presentation?*, 1 respondent (1.5 percent) reported one month or more, 15 (23.1 percent) reported a few weeks, 21 (32.3 percent) reported a week, 23 (35.4 percent) reported a few days, 3 (4.6 percent) reported a day prior, and 2 (3.1 percent) reported the same day. When asked *How many times do you typically rehearse a presentation?*, 17 respondents (26.6 percent) reported they did not rehearse, 15 (23.4 percent) reported they rehearsed one time, 19 (29.7 percent) reported they rehearsed two times, and 13 (20.3 percent) reported they rehearsed three or more times. When asked *How strong do you think your academic presentations are?*, 5 respondents (7.7 percent) reported "fair," 35 (53.8 percent) reported "good," 22 (33.8 percent) reported "very good," and 3 (4.6 percent) reported "excellent." When asked *How stressful is it to prepare an academic presentation?*, 16 respondents (24.6 percent) reported "not at all stressful," 22 (33.8 percent) reported "slightly stressful," 23 (35.4 percent) reported "somewhat stressful," 3 (4.6 percent) reported "stressful," and 1 (1.5 percent) reported "extremely stressful."

Expectations for Academic Presentations

Participants reported they attended an average of 56.1 percent (*SD* = 22.7 with a range from 10 to 96 percent) of conference sessions. When asked why they do not attend, the primary reasons are uninteresting topics and taking some time off for leisure (see Table 2). Networkers and focused attendees do not report any statistically differences in terms of reasons for not attending sessions.

Table 2. Reasons for Not Attending Conference Sessions.

Survey item	*M*	*SD*	% Agree
Uninteresting topics (64)	5.44	1.58	54.7
Leisure (enjoying the local area) (64)	4.56	1.82	32.8
Conference fatigue (63)	4.43	1.69	25.4
Other (27)	3.89	1.89	22.2
Worried about poor presentations (62)	3.10	1.75	9.7

Note. *N* = 65. Participants responded to this item on a scale from 1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree.

When asked how to allocate the time across portions of a 20-minute research presentation, participants indicated they preferred the most time spent on findings and results and the Q&A portions of the presentation (see Table 3). Networkers and focused attendees shared the same views without any significant differences in terms of time allocations for the presentations.

Table 3. Preferred Length in Minutes of Presentation Sections for 20-Minute Research Presentations.

Presentation Section	*M*	*SD*
Introduction (including Problem Statement)	2.39	1.00
Theoretical Framework/Literature Review	2.69	1.11
Research Questions and Methodology	3.06	1.33
Findings/Results	4.67	1.30
Implications (Conclusions, Limitations, Future Research, etc.)	3.06	1.34
Q&A	4.19	1.42

Note. $N = 65$. Participants could allocate a total of 20 minutes across these presentation sections.

When asked how to allocate the time across portions of a pedagogical presentation, participants indicated they preferred the most time spent on the details about the teaching approach, the learning outcomes, and the Q&A portions of the presentation (see Table 4). Networkers and focused attendees shared the same views without any significant differences in terms of time allocations for the presentations.

Table 4. Preferred Length in Minutes of Presentation Sections for 20-Minute Pedagogical Presentations.

Presentation Section	*M*	*SD*
Background and rationale for teaching approach	2.92	1.41
Description of and details about the teaching approach	4.60	1.27
Student learning outcomes and student experiences	4.27	0.98
Ways to improve or adapt the approach	3.77	1.34
Q&A	4.51	1.52

Note. $N = 65$. Participants could allocate a total of 20 minutes across these presentation sections.

As far as preference for elements to include in presentations, participants generally agreed that concrete stories or examples were helpful, the value of the presentation should be stated upfront, and audience involvement is ideal (see Table 5). However, networkers and focused attendees differ on some of these items. About 76 percent of networkers agree that the value of the presentation should be stated upfront compared to 33 percent of focused attendees ($\chi 2 = 11.29$, $p < .001$**). About 66 percent of networkers agree that the audience should be involved compared to 42 percent of the focused attendees ($\chi 2 = 3.48$, $p = .031$*). About 68 percent of networkers agree that stories and examples improve the presentation compared to 45 percent of focused attendees ($\chi 2 = 3.12$, $p = .039$*). Finally, 53 percent of networkers agree that humor is an important part of the presentation compared to 29 percent of focused attendees ($\chi 2 = 3.30$, $p = 035$*).

Table 5. Preferences for Presentation Elements.

Survey item	*M*	*SD*	% Agree
Concrete stories or examples	5.80	1.25	59.4
Value of the presentation is stated upfront	5.69	1.22	61.0
Opportunities for audience involvement	5.59	1.22	56.3
More depth than breadth	5.20	1.22	36.0
Humor	5.20	1.44	43.8
Overview of key findings at the beginning	5.17	1.38	43.8

Note. $N = 64$. Participants responded to this item on a scale from 1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree.

Participants were asked how many slides were ideal for a 20-minute presentation on a slide rule that allowed for 0 to 20 slides. The mean was 10.78 slides (SD = 4.09; minimum = 0 slides; maximum = 20 slides). Participants were also asked how much text should be on each slide on a slide rule that allowed from 0 to 100 words. The mean was 17.39 words (SD = 17.39; minimum = 0 words; maximum = 80 words). As far as preferences for slides, participants overwhelmingly stated a preference for slides that are not text heavy and that contain more simplified information (i.e., charts are generally preferred over tables). Slight majorities agree they appreciate attractive slide designs and ensuring there is just one idea per slide (see Table 6). There are no statistical differences between networkers and focused attendees when it comes to their views of slide design.

Table 6. Preferences for Slide Design.

Survey item	*M*	*SD*	% Agree
I appreciate visually attractive slide designs.	5.60	1.33	53.9
I prefer one idea per slide.	5.39	1.55	53.2
I prefer images over text.	5.29	1.36	46.0
I prefer tables over charts for numerical information.	4.02	1.77	21.9
I prefer text-heavy slides to provide sufficient detail.	2.30	1.34	1.6

Note. $N = 64$. Participants responded to this item on a scale from 1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree.

Participants also responded to two open-ended questions: (1) What are your biggest peeves or complaints about academic presentations? What do you view as the most common mistakes in academic presentations? (2) What makes an academic presentation especially impactful in a positive sense? What sets the best academic presentations apart from mediocre and poor presentations? The largest concerns include the following: too many details, lack of application or relevance, boring delivery, arrogance, text-heavy slides, lack of eye contact, lack of preparation, and going over the allotted time or poor time management. Conversely, the features of presentations that participants most appreciated included practical and relevant content, enthusiasm, precision and conciseness, effective slide design, audience connection, and a clear pattern to the presentation. Representative comments for these themes can be seen in Tables 7 and 8 in the appendix.

Recommendations and Discussion

Results from this study can serve as useful reminders for academic presenters about common expectations of conference audiences. Specifically, we encourage academic presenters to consider the following based on the quantitative and qualitative findings from this study.

Focus on a few key ideas and keep it simple.

Overwhelmingly in the open-ended comments, participants emphasized simplicity in content and delivery while complaining frequently about too many details. This in many ways matches the advice given by Smith and Salmond (2011), who stated, “The overriding principle of preparing a conference presentation should be making it as simple as possible” (p. 585). By nature, this is challenging for many academics who relish the details that give substance to compelling arguments. It requires discipline to identify the most essential ideas and allow conference attendees to read the papers if they are interested in more details.

Prioritize the content that audiences value the most.

Participants provided their recommendations for how to allocate time for various portions of research-based and pedagogical presentations. They resoundingly prioritized the research findings and the teaching ideas rather than excessive background details. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the overall recommendations from this group of participants along with the number of words, assuming 140 words per minute (this is a common speaking rate for public speeches). Many presenters may want to draft out content and approximate presentation times based on word counts so that they avoid using too much of their presentation time on details that audiences are less interested in.

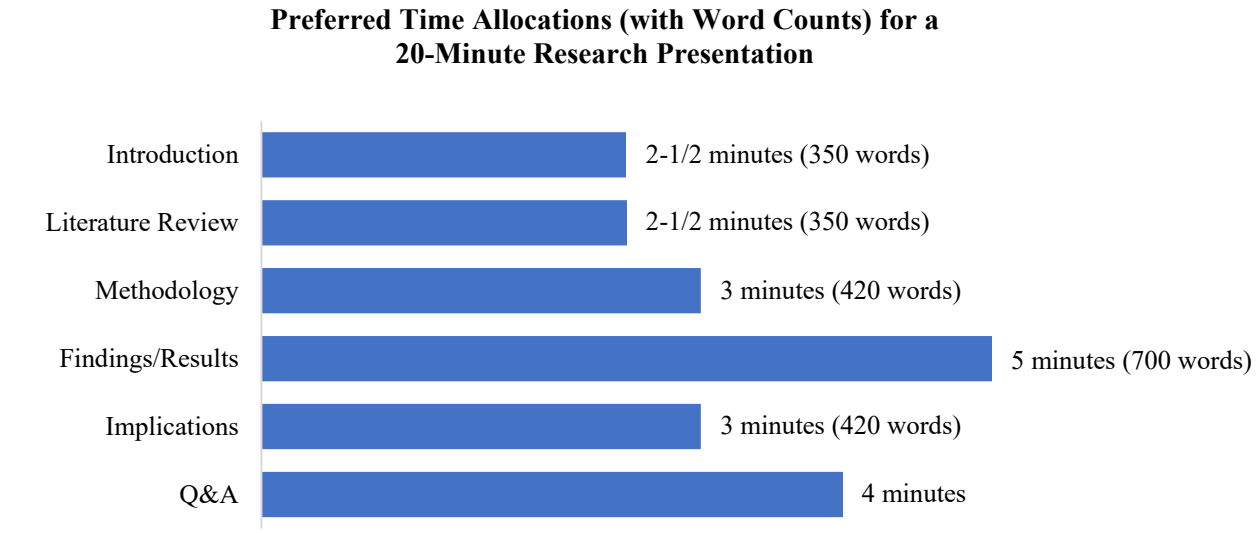

Figure 1. Suggested time allocations for a research-based presentation based on the reactions of survey respondents.

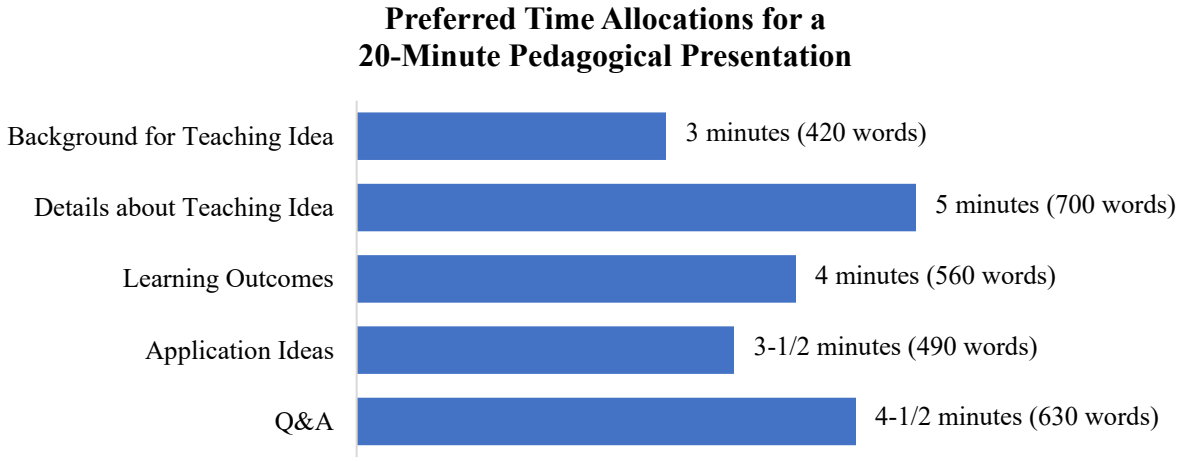

Figure 2. Suggested time allocations for a pedagogical-based presentation based on the reactions of survey respondents.

Provide a clear pattern to the presentation.

In open-ended comments, participants emphasized they prefer precise and concise presentations that have a clear formula. Similarly, in the closed survey items and the open-ended comments, many participants noted the importance of giving audiences a clear preview upfront with key findings so that there was a road map for the presentation. One participant commented, "There is no one formula for a perfect academic presentation. I think it requires a combination of a compelling topic, the ability of the presenter to convey the importance or appeal of the topic, skill at presenting information clearly and logically, interesting slides, and key takeaways."

Engage audiences with interesting content and interaction.

Across many of the survey questions, participants emphasized their hopes for enthusiastic presenters who use stories and examples, use slides sparingly, and provide opportunities for interaction with audiences. One person summed up this approach, "The standard approach to academic presenting is boring. I like information presented like in Ted Talks – very few slides of text, if any, and any images and charts are very clear and interesting. The presenter talks to the audience in a very conversational, natural way. Academic research is harder to present that way, but it can be done. In most cases, I wish the literature review was left out and the implications part would become a part of the discussion with the audience. I also like panel discussions over topics." It was common for participants to mention thoughts such as the following: "I think the presentations should be more conversational. I like the discussion time."

Be creative.

Some of our questions assumed standard aspects of presentations. While it is true that most presenters stick to these presentation components, presenters should not feel constrained by them. There are many opportunities to present in new and interesting ways. We appreciate the view of one of the participants: "Everyone is unique and I appreciate how we are all collaborative and difference in perspective grows the research within the academy." We support efforts by presenters to try new approaches. In doing so, all conference attendees benefit from experiencing new ways to connect with audiences.

Our study has several limitations. First, it was confined to a single professional society in a single discipline. Second, the sample size did not allow meaningful comparison across professionals at various stages of their careers since most who took the survey were quite experienced at academic conferences. Third, in the development of survey items, it relied on common advice rather than established measures. Since academic conferences are such an important part of many scholars' career progression and professional satisfaction, future studies of academic presentations are needed. We recommend that future research about academic presentations involve broader samples in terms of disciplines, professional societies, and career stages. Also, since academic conferences tend to draw scholars from across the world, we also recommend research about cross-cultural expectations for effective academic presentations.

Conclusion

This mixed-method study of presenters at an IS conference focused on the reasons conference goers attend conferences, their own preparation for academic presentations, and their expectations for academic presentations. It found that conference goers can generally be categorized as networkers or focused attendees. Overall, the largest concerns for academic presentations include the following: too many details, lack of application or relevance, boring delivery, arrogance, text-heavy slides, lack of eye contact, lack of preparation, and going over the allotted time or poor time management. The features of presentations that

participants most appreciated included practical and relevant content, enthusiasm, precision and conciseness, effective slide design, audience connection, and a clear pattern to the presentation. Generally, academic presenters are encouraged to allocate the largest amount of presentation time to findings/results and Q&A with limited time for the theoretical framework/literature review.

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Appendix

Table 7. Top Concerns about Academic Presentations.

Theme	Typical Comments
Too many details	● "My biggest peeve about academic presentations is overexplaining the minutiae of the study that then lead to presentations being way over the time limit." ● "Too much from the literature review. . . maybe 1-2 slides is more than enough." ● "I think the worst presentations spend too much time on background (lit review). Very often presenters seem uninterested in what their audiences are experiencing. This is especially the case for later afternoon and Saturday sessions." ● "Charts that have too much information and/or too small to see. Lots of text on slides. Presentations that spend 15 minutes on the overview and lit review and never get to the findings." ● "PPT was poorly developed (too much details)."
Lack of application or relevance	● "Reading material and no application." ● "Some presentations go into technical details without describing their contribution to the subject matter." ● "People presenting papers that are dumb. They are not relevant to anyone but were 'good enough' to be accepted so they can add another paper to their CV."
Boring delivery	● "Extremely boring presentations that are read (lots of text) and tables or charts that are unintelligible" ● "Monotone voice." ● "Not interacting enough with the audience or engaging them. Some presentations can be quite boring."
Arrogance	● "Assuming we know nothing, and they know everything!" ● "Spending too much time talking about themselves."
Text-heavy slides	● "Text too small to jam in more content." ● "Too much data/information per slide with too small font." ● "Too long and busy slides."
Lack of eye contact	● "When presenter is reading the text written on slides." ● "No eye contact or interaction with the audience." ● "A common mistake is too much direct reading."
Lack of preparation	● "People who clearly haven't prepared, use terminology or techniques incorrectly, or who don't appear to have actually researched anything;" ● "Not prepared, not engaged, reading from slides, cannot respond to questions."
Going over time/poor time management	● "When people go over time and I can't see the presentation I wanted to see. Please keep to your time slots!" ● "My biggest peeve is when a presentation goes too long and the session chair does not stop it." ● "Poor pacing. No time for Q&A."

Note. Participants responded to the following open-ended item: *What are your biggest peeves or complaints about academic presentations? What do you view as the most common mistakes in academic presentations?*

Table 8. Most Valued Features of Academic Presentations.

Theme	Typical Comments
Practical and relevant content	● "Clear and actionable outcomes or findings." ● "If I learned something new to share in my classes. If I learned something new that grew my knowledge." ● "Applied, understandable, direct, some humor." ● "An innovative idea that is explained clearly." ● "The ones that I can apply in one of my courses, or I could do a paper on the topic building off of it in the following year. Usually one paper per conference will be in this category, sometimes many more." ● "Clear take-aways, humor, engagement." ● "Positive - research that impacts both industry and academics by bridging the two."
Enthusiasm	● "A good presentation conveys ideas and emotion. Has lots of pictures/charts and whitespace. Speaker is enthusiastic and knows his/her audience." ● "Dynamic positive presenter, audience participation." ● "When the presenter/researcher is passionate about the material being presented and is prepared and engaged, and, is open to discussion of feedback, ideas and suggestions."
Precision and conciseness	● "Introducing an interesting topic and giving a succinct explanation of the methods and results." ● "Succinct communication of idea and finding." ● "When presenter manages to point major ideas to attract interest of audience in a way to return later to read the paper. Leaving technical (often boring) details for reading later." ● "Precise information and shorter in length." ● "Best presentations are precise and concise."
Effective slide design	● "Well designed with fewer slides, large fonts." ● "High quality slides and interaction" ● "Minimalist and stylish PPT"
Audience connection	● "When the presenter makes a connection with the audience, especially with humor, and focuses on the methodology, results, and then has a conversation with the audience." ● "Attendee/presenter discussion. The discussion is why we go. We could read the paper outside of the conference." ● "I think the presentations should be more conversational. I like the discussion time." ● "Talking with us instead of to us."
Clear pattern to the presentation	● "Clear problem, methods, results." ● "Clear route from problem-hypothesis-research-results-application." ● "Clear objectives, good slides, little time on background and lit review and more time on what you did, how you did it, and what you found out."

Note. Participants responded to the following open-ended item: *What makes an academic presentation especially impactful in a positive sense? What sets the best academic presentations apart from mediocre and poor presentations?*