

Bev Sher: Great slides make great presentations

I wanted students to have a group experience and a formal presentation, and I'm also really interested in getting them into the biomedical literature as fast as I can, because it's just what you have to do to have a sense for what the excitement of science is really all about.

I like the process of them talking to each other about the paper. It's actually something that scientists do in a process called Journal Club, which is why this is called Journal Club. Everybody reads the paper, they argue about it, and they come to some kind of consensus about it. That's actually going to be the first step in the way I've revised [the course]. They're actually going to do that with me, because that way I think they'll feel a little bit more secure about it.

Then the next thing they're going to do is get ready to present it to their fellow students, and they have about 15 minutes. I am forcing them to give equal time to each member of the group and they have to present it with good slides. There are many, many bad slides out there: bullet points are bad; unnecessary special effects are bad. But Michael Alley's wonderful book, *The Craft of Scientific Presentations*, talks about assertion-evidence slides and increasingly I'm seeing them in real scientific papers--or sorry, scientific presentations--because they work.

So, the idea behind an assertion evidence slide is that the take-home message of the slide, the assertion, is in the title at the top, and it's capitalized as if it were a sentence, not a title. There's no punctuation at the end because you don't need to end a sentence with a period if you're not following with other sentences, and the visual underneath it has to support the argument that that assertion makes. So, you can't have an irrelevant picture or you can't have two pictures that are unrelated to each other and to the assertion up at the top. Alley talks a lot about the horrible defaults of PowerPoint and how they generate really bad slides, so this is how students learn to make good ones. And I think once you've sat through a presentation with good slides you'll never go back to the bad ones. They have readings from Alley; they have a link to a tutorial that's very quick that shows examples of good slides and examples of people presenting them.

And generally what happens is that when students first make their slides they're terrible. They just go back to what they've always done. So, you know, two pictures unrelated to what's at the top. At the top is like "ribosomes" or something that doesn't make any sense, so I comment and then I remind them, "Hey, there's the tutorial there," and what shows up in class is much better. So they learn pretty quickly, and by the end of the semester generally the first set of slides is better, because group seven has seen six other presentations and they have a chance to see some good ones. The other thing that I think helps is that there's a lot of peer feedback. So, after they talk with me they will go and huddle and do their own thing. They also have to do a presentation to the next group, so group two is going to listen to group one's practice talk, and they're going to get points for it, and they're going to make comments using my grade sheet, so they'll have the criteria in mind, which I think helps them build a better presentation.