

Cheap Thrills – Instant Inspiration for the Masses

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*“In words are seen the state of mind and character and disposition of the speaker.” – Plutarch, Greek historian, biographer, and essayist. (~45 AD to ~125 AD)*¹

1 Introduction

FOSS lives because of the people who use it.

Be they beginners or experienced professionals, everyone can offer valuable contributions and insights to FOSS development and improvement. However, most people don't get up one morning and decide to use some particular distribution or piece of software. In most cases they need to be convinced, or at least provided with a small trigger. One possible trigger can be a talk at a conference or meeting. A presentation about a technical or social topic, delivered by a good speaker can be an inspiring experience - or a dreary and almost agonising one.

On the following pages, I will introduce a set of hints and guidelines on how to give a good presentation. From choice of topic and preparations to the actual delivery and its aftermath, there are many things that should be considered. I'll give general suggestions as well as some personal tips and tricks you may not have come across yet. Everything presented in this paper is either from my own experience as a speaker or talks I've seen. This is a very practical topic and thus this paper does not include everything from the talk which will also feature some practical demonstrations.

¹Hint No. 1: Show them who's boss right at the start. Impress with a brainy quote! Europeans may chose from a broad range of Ancient World writers and philosophers, US citizens may want to go for a dead president.

2 Preparation

2.1 The weeks before

A good part of a talk's success depends on a careful choice of topic and content. When considering whether to answer a Call for Papers you should ask yourself a couple of questions: Is the topic appropriate for the type of event? Who is the audience? What previous knowledge can you presuppose? What other talks will there be? What is the event's scope? Is it a regular LUG meeting, a conference or a business talk? Once you decided that your talk fits the event and audience, take a minute to also consider whether it fits **you**. Are you sufficiently competent on the topic? From my own experience I can say that *"Not yet, but I have n weeks left until the event and will do some reading"* is a bad answer to that question. Presenting freshly acquired knowledge is never a good idea. Firstly the reassuring certainty that you have an in-depth knowledge about your topic gives you a calmness that will benefit the quality of your talk, and secondly not being competent at a topic almost always backfires. You take the risk of getting muddled or be confronted with questions you are not able to answer. All of this leaves a bad impression and should be avoided.

The next step after deciding on on a topic and content is preparing the slides for your talk. That is, if you are using slides, since not every talk needs them. If you are giving e.g. an inspirational speech or talking about a social topic you might actually chose to go without any slides. A lot has been said on how to compose good slides, so I'll keep this short and only give a few general guidelines. Firstly, slides are not made so people who didn't see your talk can read up on it later. For that purpose you usually write a paper about your talk, giving the necessary information. I recommend that you always write the paper that goes with a talk in advance. Bringing your thoughts to paper/screen helps to assure they are clear and coherent. If you do not write a paper, write at least a detailed outline before doing your slides. Do not make them up as you go along as it's bad for structure. When designing your slides, keep in mind that you want your audience to do two things at the same time: read your slides and follow your talk. Thus, the two should complete each other. Don't write down every single word you are going to say, too much to read will make people ignore either you or your slides. But also do not limit yourself to a few catchwords. Slides should provide the kind of information that you cannot or do not want to give orally: diagrams, code snippets, URLs or long versions for abbreviations you are using. In order to allow your audience to easily read over your slides as they listen to you, they should be as easily readable as possible. Chose an un-

obtrusive design and a large, simple font. Also be careful about using pictures that do not transport any real information (read: funny illustrative cartoons (read: dilbert strips)). They are nice, but do use them sparingly and make sure they really fit. Last but not least: Have as many people as possible proof read your slides. Even the tenth proof reader will still find typos or ambiguities.

Once your slides are done, you'll need to test them. In order to do this you should present your talk at least once in order to check whether it has the right length and a nice flow (no repetitions, sudden changes of topic, lengthy sections etc.). If you want to go for the real thing, present the talk to a bunch of friends or colleagues. This can also be a good way to deal with stage fright. If you cannot find any volunteers, try giving the talk in front of anything else that can serve as a pseudo audience: your hamster (extra points for ignoring the constant chewing, a feature also found at least once among every larger audience), an infant or simply a mirror. Whatever you do, you should at least click through your slides once, mumbling along in some way or another.

This is also helpful when presenting a talk in a language that is not your first language. When writing up slides, you tend to think along in your mother tongue and not notice you are missing a word. You will notice it however when you are actually giving your talk, and so will your audience. So, do look up important/difficult words in advance. If one or a few words are really troubling you, try to find easier synonyms or paraphrase them. It also helps to write a small cheat sheet. (Please **only** use this if you are standing behind some lectern or table, do not fumble them from your pockets when getting stuck.) In any case, if you have trouble remembering something now, you can be sure it will be gone once you are in front of your audience. Finally, a last golden piece of advice: This section is called "The weeks before" for a reason! Please, do yourself and your audience a favour and prepare talks and their accompanying materials well in advance. Do not put them off until the last day. It will be much harder for you and probably also reflect on the piece itself.²

2.2 The morning before

Once you have made sure your talk will be all nice and shiny turn your attention to yourself. The choice of clothes may not seem important at first, and maybe your audience really doesn't care much. Still, there are a few things

²Believe me, I know. It is currently late at night and well beyond the deadline. I am tired and dozy and can only image how much more eloquent, expedient and enlightening this paper would have been, had I started writing it in time.

to remember. Most of all: Do NOT dress to impress! Dress as you always do or rather, dress like the others. If it is an Open Source event and everyone else is walking around in jeans and t-shirt there's no need to turn up in a suit or costume. If you are talking to business people you'll have to comply with their standards, but still, chose something that comes naturally to you. Forcing yourself into something you feel silly in or that is uncomfortable isn't of much use. The bit more of credibility you gain from your good looks will most likely be outweighed by the effects of the nervousness and discomfort that come with wearing uncomfortable clothing or feeling dressed up. Also, many people tend to get into some kind of mannerism when being concentrated and/or nervous. Thus, if you are prone to fiddling, avoid clothes with strings, buckles or other possible "toys". If you have long hair you may want to tie it back rather than having it in your face. (This also applies if you do not play with it. Your face is what people want to look at, so don't hide it!).

Once at the event (especially if it is a larger event, such as a fair or conference) take some time to wander around and get a feeling for the atmosphere. Check if your talk is still at the time and place you suppose it to be. If possible find the room you'll be talking at and make sure all the equipment is there and working. If you bring your own laptop make sure it works with the beamer, if not, make sure your slides are present and look good on the computer they are presented from. If you are with friends or belong to a booth, do not hang out there until the very last minute. Reserve some time to take a stroll and talk to people. What kind of people are there? How is the vibe? Are people happy with the conference or is there a bad mood? How did the other speakers do? Ask them how their talks went and what the audience is like. Even with everything prepared and a fixed content you can still tweak a talk in order to adapt to the individual situation. Possible customisations include how much humour you use and what kind, which points you stress most or how much time you reserve for questions/discussion. A good speaker will never deliver a talk twice in exactly the same way. Be ready to adapt to the situation and maybe even (if really necessary!) make some last minute changes to your slides.

2.3 The hour before

For most people this is the hour of stage fright. Everybody has their own ways to deal with this. My personal advice would be to do something totally different. Play some mindless little game on your laptop, talk to people, take a walk around the block or knit a scarf. Basically, you can do whatever you want

but there are a few dos and donts: Don't go for lunch/dinner! A full stomach is no base for a good talk. If you are hungry, have a chocolate bar or something of that kind but not more. If you are prone to stage fright, be assured that whatever you ate, you'll regret it. Also, don't try to drown your nervousness. Be sure you have something (non carbonated!) handy to drink during your talk but be careful before. If you are having a dry mouth beforehand, believe me, drinking won't help. A final hint for the fiddlers: Empty your pockets now!

3 Delivery

You have now reached the big moment where you finally step in front of the audience and present your talk. With careful preparation you have already weeded out a lot of possible risks, but of course there are still things to take care of.

3.1 Speech

As stated in the beginning of this paper, what you say doesn't only tell people what you want to let them know but much more. Also the way we speak is very much influenced by how we feel. It is thus important to watch the way you speak. My most important advice on this issue is simple: BREATHE!!! Most people tend to get faster and faster when they feel uneasy, simply because the brain says *"This is an unpleasant situation and we will not get out of it until we are done with this talk!"* so your natural reaction is to speed up. Once you start speeding up, you start breathing wrongly and things go downhill from there. So, breeeaaathe! Slowly. Thoroughly. If you notice that you are getting in a rush, make a break. Take a deep breath and maybe a sip of water. This only takes a second or two, though it feels longer, but greatly helps to calm your nerves and decelerate your talking speed. Also try to listen to yourself. This sounds tricky but the essence is simple: You already know what you are going to say, so the usual behaviour is to always think one step ahead. Try not to do this, it again makes you rush. Instead try to go with your talk as it advances. Study the audience's reactions and try to see whether they can follow you. Actually listening to yourself can also help you spot recurring expressions, something that you are likely to use when under stress. An average person's vocabulary is somewhere between 20,000 and 50,000 words. However, under pressure it tends to shrink to the equivalent of an average marvel comic. So be aware of repetitions and recurring expressions.

Also, don't be afraid of silence! Pauses are mostly a dramatic measure, they are your friends and not a sign of incompetence. They give you and your audience a little rest. You can use them to breathe, gather your thoughts, raise tension, take a sip of water or give people time to read something on your slides. Pauses are totally okay. If you stumble and need to think for a moment, just do so, do not fill every pause or gap with filler expressions or "uuhmm"s and "eehm"s. Pauses are good.

3.2 Body language

Even more telling than your speech is your body language. The first question is where to look. If you are really nervous it is probably better to pick someone in your favour and address your talk at that particular person. In general though I'd recommend not to focus on a single person but let your eyes wander over the audience to get an overall impression. If there is somebody who is really irritating you, try to avoid looking at them. I once gave a talk at which I kept staring at a particularly grumpy looking person for the entire time, thinking about nothing else but how much he seemed to hate my talk. When I was finished, I noticed that I had basically rushed through my talk in half the time I had planned and some people, whose English was not too firm, had not been able to follow me any more since I was talking so fast. So, do not repeat my mistake, if there is a person that distracts you, be it by looking grumpy, fidgeting, talking to someone else or whatever, try to ignore them for the moment. If you want, you can approach them after your talk and often it will show that they actually didn't mean to be as distracting as they were. (In my case it later turned out that the relevant person was totally okay with my talk and simply always looked that grumpy.)

Next is gesturing, how much gesture you use is pretty much up to you. Some people use gestures only sparingly. If you usually are a laid-back person it is absolutely okay to stick to that demeanour in your talks as well. Just take care not to be too boring. Hint: Your pockets are always a bad place for your hands when talking! Some (bad) guidebooks give the advice to practice your talk in front of a mirror, along with the fitting gestures. Don't. It looks plain silly. This is what you do as a major politician or propagandist. With normal people it just doesn't work. Other people (such as me) like to gesture and grimace a lot and basically never stand still. This is okay too, the only problem is that it makes giving talks a bit more exhausting and assures you look funny on pretty much every picture that is taken during your talk.

Same goes for walking around vs. standing still, both is okay, just do whatever fits your usual demeanour. Either way, take care not to block the audience's view at your slides and if you do walk around don't do it too excessively. It makes it harder for your audience to switch between you and your slides.

3.3 Managing time

Good timing is an art that is learned by practice and cannot really be caught in simple rules. However, there are a few things you should keep in mind. Firstly, do not overrun your time! It's not fair on the speaker(s) after you and also unpleasant for your audience. They will eventually start shuffling, checking their watches and thus give their uneasy feeling back to you. This is an unpleasant situation you should try to avoid. Check the time occasionally while you talk to see whether you are still in time. This allows you to adapt your speed while talking. If you have a lectern or desk put your watch or an easy to read clock there, so you don't have to interrupt your talk to check the time, but can do it with a side glance. Also prepare some "stretchers", things you can talk about if you have time left and on the other hand think about which bits you can leave out if you get pressed on time. This could be some extra examples, jokes or additional explanations. Try to have several of these small "crush zones" in your talk so you can adapt its length without having to do obvious things such as skipping slides or adding things at the end.

When planning your talk, you should also consider how much time for questions and discussion it will probably require and how likely it is that you'll have to deal with interjections. On larger conferences and events you are usually given a rough time frame how long you should talk and how much time you should reserve for discussion. As a rule of thumb try to reserve about a third of your overall time for questions/discussions, a bit more if you are giving an introductory or very controversial talk.

3.4 Managing your audience

Your audience is at the same time your best friend and your biggest enemy. First of all though, it's a group of people and thus subjected to group behaviour. Ever noticed that you laugh about much more jokes in a movie when seeing it at the cinema than when seeing it at home in TV? Herd instinct! As a speaker this is one of your biggest allies. If you manage to win the majority the others will eventually follow. These mechanisms can have a lot of effect on your talk and you should keep them in mind. A good example for this are

interjections. Dealing with them is not always easy. Generally there is no harm in allowing them, especially if it is a question concerning content. If it is a criticism or some witty comment, things get a bit more complicated. If you are not careful you may find your talk taken over by some jester. Also their example will encourage others and things will eventually run out of hand. So, how do you deal with such interjections? From my experience the best thing is to give a short(!) answer and continue your talk right away. Do not leave a pause for the other to jump in. If the person still keeps disrupting you, point them to the q&a time after your talk. It is always good to encourage comments, but tell your audience that you want them after your talk.

Once your talk is over the time for questions has come. Take care to answer as many questions as possible, do not get caught up in a discussion with a single person or group of people. If such a discussion starts to arise offer to continue it after this session, either in some other location or (if appropriate) on the respective mailing list. If a discussion within the audience comes up do not let it get out of hand, you are still the speaker, you are standing in front and it is your job to manage/moderate such a discussion. Again, if it gets too much, starts hindering other people and their questions or you run out of time, try shifting the discussion to another time and place. As a general rule of thumb you should always provide a possibility for further discussion and comments, e.g. by having your last slide repeat your email address of the address of your or your project's homepage or mailing list. Let people know that you are interested in their opinions and make sure they know where to send them.

4 The aftermath

Your talk is not over when you leave the room. Apart from eventual continuing discussions the old German football rule applies: *"After the game is before the game."* So, some aftercare is in order. Firstly take some notes on what questions you got after your talk. If there were problems of comprehension try to improve your slides and your talk so these things get clearer. Did people miss things that you forgot to include? Were they able to follow your examples? Did you have redundancies where people got bored? Like a piece of software, a talk is never finished but should be subject to constant improvement. Be approachable after your talk. Many people don't like to state their opinions in public and prefer approaching you privately after the talk. Or maybe you made a really silly mistake and they don't want to publically embarrass you about it. So stay

around for a bit. Once back at home update your slides and (if existing) your paper. It is best to do this as soon as possible so the memory is still fresh. Also fix spelling mistakes and typos right away so you don't forget them.

5 Conclusion

We have now reached the end of a very long and maybe even a bit intimidating list of various dos and donts. If you still feel unsure (or didn't but do now) let me assure you that there is no cause for it. Giving talks is, like most things, something that is learned by practice. Rules give you a starting point but eventually you will leave them behind and develop your own tricks and techniques that match your style and taste. Until then I hope the hints provided here will be of some help to you. You do not have to follow them all by the letter. Make choices! However, if you remember but three things from this talk here is what they should be:

1. Good preparation is key.
2. Breeaaathe!
3. NON carbonated!