One of life’s special pleasures is sitting in the back of the classroom, posting comments on Facebook and watching videos of ninja kittens. As professors, we are technically obligated to chide students for this behavior, though we confess that we like it, too.

But even students must sometimes stand in front, with a crowd of faces staring blankly at them—or down at their laptops—as the case may be. Perhaps you are one of those valiant psychology majors who has gotten involved in research and will have an opportunity to present your work at a conference.

Unfortunately, such presentations involve more than posting a clever synopsis on Twitter: “no main effects but big-time interaction, p < .01, yay!” They involve public speaking, which can be technically defined as the art of standing in front of strangers while trying despirately not to embarrass oneself (Feldman & Silvia, 2010). Even though “speaking” and being in “public” aren’t scary by themselves, when these two words come together people often fear disaster.

Giving your first talk is hard, and that’s okay; such is the nature of being a beginner. But even beginners need not embarrass themselves. Take heed of the following most common mistakes, then take heart. With the right preparation, you can ensure that your first talk will be at least above average.

Mistake 1: Avoiding Rehearsing
Public speaking can make students nervous. Sometimes, really nervously. Although students often fear that their anxiety will get the best of them, we have yet to see a student vomit or pass out. Most of the time, anxiety serves a more positive purpose by motivating people to take action. These actions are usually the right ones, including spending time preparing the talk, developing PowerPoint slides, getting feedback, and rehearsing until roommates shout, “Enough, already!”

But feeling nervous can trigger avoidance, too. Often, this is what deters talks. Many people avoid rehearsing. They may think, “I’m better off not rehearsing so my talk will be more spontaneous and interesting.” When you’re nervous, this reasoning may be a tempting way to reduce your anxiety in the short term. But our bet is that you know deep down that this thought is delusional and ultimately won’t help you to give a good talk.

Confronting feared things makes people anxious. Even as seasoned presenters, we dislike developing slides for a new talk and stumbling through the first few awkward rehearsals. However, we’re thankful that we can stumble alone instead of in front of an audience of strangers and friends.

Mistake 2: Using Your Notes as a Crutch
Some students cope with anxiety by developing notes that are way too extensive. We’ve seen students give a 12-minute talk holding a sheaf of papers that would clog an industrial shredder. Even more commonly, people develop PowerPoint slides so detailed that they resemble architectural blueprints. As a result, the talk itself does not go well. The presenter just reads from the slides, and the audience slowly drifts off to sleep (or finds another video of ninja kittens). The basic connection between speaker and audience has been broken. Moreover, research suggests that people learn less when speakers simply read from their slides (Kalyuga, Chandler, & Sweller, 2004; Leahy, Chandler, & Sweller, 2003).

Experienced presenters can unleash a talk with nothing but their brains, but beginning presenters shouldn’t feel bad about using their slides or a set of brief notes to prompt them. A common mistake, however, is that these become a crutch or, for some students, a full-body prosthetic exoskeleton. You should think of notes—they be a sheet of paper, note cards, or cues within your slides—as prompts for memory, not as things to read aloud. If a random stranger could give your talk based on your notes or slides, you have listed too many details.

Instead, choose one of two strategies. If you use your PowerPoint presentation for cues, make sure each slide contains no more than four or five quick bullet points rather than complete paragraphs. This will reduce the temptation to simply read from the screen.

Alternatively, if you feel you need separate notes, create only a brief outline of your talk. Don’t use complete sentences or long statements; simply write a few words to cue you. You’ll be able to glance at your notes quickly, remind yourself of what comes next, and get back to connecting with your audience.

Mistake 3: Embracing the Chaos of Time
You have rehearsed, and you are ready, but you might be too ready. Students often stuff too much information into their talks, usually for fear of leaving something out or to preempt questions. But presentations have time limits, which are typically firm. Talking too long is the cardinal sin of public speaking. First, you may suffer the moderator cutting you off. And second, you’ll ratchet up the anxiety of the other presenters, who will find themselves with less time to present than they expected.

There’s an easy solution to this all-too-common problem: time yourself when you practice your talk, and don’t consider yourself ready until you have the timing down cold. Seasoned presenters use an 80% rule (Berkun, 2009; Reynolds, 2008). If your talk is slated for 15 minutes—the typical slot in regional conferences—then aim for 12 minutes; if your talk is 20 minutes, aim for 16. The remainder is time for questions or a handy buffer in case you or someone before you takes too long.

What if your talk is too short? We rarely see this at conferences, but we see it a lot in our classes. The answer is simple. Add stuff. If your talk doesn’t fill 12 minutes, you’re missing too many details about your method, results, and the conceptual background of your work. Your research advisor will have suggestions for things to add.

Mistake 4: Ignoring Looming Technology Doom
Although the biggest worry of novice pre-
senters is that the audience will dislike their talk or ask impossible questions, the biggest worry of experienced presenters is that the equipment will fail. Will the cruddy LCD projector belch fire? Will I have to present using an laser pointer the size of a baguette? The cruelest fact of giving a talk is that you rarely give your talk on the same computer you used to make your slides. Fancy elements like embedded audio and video, huge images, and flashy backgrounds work well on your own machine but usually fail in dazzling, flamboyant ways on someone else’s computer. That sweet font you downloaded from the Internet could be your undoing.

Before your talk, develop your slides to run well on any PC: make them in PowerPoint (not OpenOffice Impress or Corel Presentations), use boring sans-serif fonts that all machines have (e.g., Arial, Helvetica, and Verdana), and avoid embedded audio and video. On the day of your talk, bring your slides in three forms: (1) attached to a message in your e-mail account, (2) on a friend’s USB drive, and (3) on your own USB drive, which you should keep on your key chain or duct tape to your stomach. Before the talk, show up early to load your slides on the machine and to make sure they look right. If they don’t, you’ll have at least a few minutes to change them.

Mistake 5: Forgetting to Prepare for Questions

The end of a talk is always a relief. Once again, humans prevail in the ceaseless struggle of mankind vs. LCD projectors. But your task as a presenter isn’t finished—nearly all audiences have a few questions. A common mistake is to forget to prepare for this part of the presentation. Most students prepare extensively for the talk itself, but when it comes to the Q&A period, they throw themselves on the mercy of a fickle and capricious universe.

Don’t let the Q&A period freak you out. Students often fear facing hostile questions, but this rarely happens. There are two important reasons you won’t get a questioner who stands up and shouts, “I denounce this!” First, the audience is on your side. Most attendees have given talks before, and they know how hard it is. They’re probably glad you did the study; after all, you know its details well. The audience doesn’t really know your study, so they probably won’t even notice if your answers are technically incorrect. To prepare, just review the nuts and bolts of your research project—the sample, procedures, methods, and analyses—the day before giving your talk.

The second class of questions concerns the implications of your research. People commonly ask what your work means for the major theories in your area of study or how your work could be applied to social and clinical problems. To prepare, interrogate your advisor. Ask, “What are the major applications of this work? What are the major competing theories? What’s the most controversial idea in this talk?” Your advisor’s answers (or evasive hemming and hawing) will give you direction to begin crafting your answers.

The Big Picture

Although speaking at a conference may seem intimidating at first, with basic preparation, even first-time presenters can give a talk they’ll be proud of. Every psychologist, including those in your audience, has had a first speaking experience. They know you’re a student and want you to succeed. In fact, they’re probably sitting there remembering their own fledgling days.

Or maybe they’re watching ninja kittens.

References