Tips for giving an engaging public talk

When giving a public talk, you’ll need to give yourself time to prepare and think about how best to engage with your audience. We’ve put together these practical tips to help you create and deliver a truly great public talk.

Understand your audience and cater to them

- Adapting to your audience is key, and if you get it right, this will play a major role in the success of your talk. Ahead of a talk, think about who you expect to be there and any potential levels of knowledge.
- Have there been any dementia-related stories in the news recently? If so, mentioning these and how your work relates can help your talk feel timely and relatable.
- For public talks, it is best to avoid technical terms and jargon. If you do need to use them, introduce terms and explain them first, and then remind people periodically during your talk of their meaning. This will help maintain interest, as using simple, easy to understand language will help people follow your story.

Focus on one thing

- Identify one aspect of your research you want to talk about instead of your entire story. This will help keep your audience engaged and interested. Including multiple topics when the audience is grappling with complex themes can lead people to switch off.
- Most public talks are around 20-30 minutes as it’s difficult to hold people’s attention much longer. Think practically about how much ground you can cover in this time with a lay audience – better to tell one aspect well than try to cover everything and people not absorbing much.
- To work out what you should focus on, identify the main message you want people to get from hearing your talk and create your story around that.

Use storytelling

- Structure your research story in a way that is going to capture the attention of your audience. There are three building blocks of any good story – setting, conflict and resolution. Building your talk with these is a great way of keeping your audience interested and wanting to find out more.
- Start by telling people the bigger picture, the gap your work aims to fill and take them on a journey of how you’re doing that. Talk about challenges you’ve overcome, the problems you’ve solved and how your work is building the broader understanding of dementia.

Engaging visuals

- Use images, props and visuals to help you illustrate and explain points in your presentation.
- If you are using slides, minimise the number of words on slides and instead use eye-catching images. You want people listening to you not reading lots of text behind you.
- If you’re talking about your results, consider whether a public audience really needs to see graphs and data to understand what you’ve found. People will be more interested in being told what you’ve learned and what it means in the bigger picture.
- We have a great range of infographics, illustrations and slide sets in our Researcher Toolkit that will help you prepare engaging visuals for your talk.
Put yourself in the story

- As a researcher, you may be most familiar with using the passive voice in papers and scientific presentations, but when engaging with the public the active voice works best.
- The active voice emphasizes the person performing an action, rather than the action itself:
  - Active = Sarah will give a talk about dementia research.
  - Passive = A talk about dementia research will be given.
- Talk about what you and others have done. This makes your story more compelling, and helps people connect with your work in a more personal way. It is details like this that can turn a good presentation into a great one.

Think about delivery

- Be aware of how you pace the talk – talking slightly slower than your usual conversation pace should mean people can keep up. Practice the presentation to make sure you don’t have to rush at the end to fit everything in.
- Face the audience and address them directly – this will keep their attention on you. Point to things on your slides, but don’t read from slides word for word.
- Use microphones whenever available, even if you think you can project your voice sufficiently. Microphones and sound systems allow people with hearing impairments to properly hear talks and be involved.
- Feel free to be expressive with your hands and move around, as this can help you express what you mean and be more engaging
- Don’t be afraid to speak passionately about your work – people find hearing from researchers really inspiring, so let your passion shine through!