Guidelines for Seminar Presentations

1 Introduction

The goal of a student seminar is two-fold: to learn new mathematical techniques and theory via self-study **and** to learn to present this material in a proper way. We will pay attention to both of these goals. This document gives some guidelines for giving effective seminar presentations.

Being able to give a good and clear presentation to a public audience is an asset you - and your future employer - will greatly value. Oral skills, alongside writing and research skills, teamwork, and time management, are aspects of your degree course, or **key skills**, which will have application to your future career in whatever field that may be. Future employers always ask for these key skills in references, and they are often seen as more important than the subject of your degree.

2 Design and delivery guidelines

The following points may be useful in designing and giving a seminar presentation:

2.1 A seminar presentation is a means of **communication** with a **specific audience** (in the case of seminar presentations, with your fellow students). It is NOT a monologue, delivered to a lecturer, to prove to him/her that you've done your homework. Keep in mind that your fellow students have spent much less time with the material than you did when preparing the presentation. (**I have rarely seen a presentation that was too easy, while I have often seen presentations that were too difficult…**)

2.2 A seminar presentation is an **oral presentation**. It is NOT a written essay that is simply read out from paper. If you don't feel confident enough to speak completely freely, which would be ideal, then use notes/bullet points on prompt cards. Make sure that your presentation uses English as it is **spoken** (so no longwinded sentences of the kind that you are likely to read), but also that the language fits the occasion (so: neither too formal, nor too casual).

2.3 Speak in a lively and **engaged** way, so that you avoid monotonous delivery. If you give the impression that you are not particularly interested in your subject, no one else will be either (particularly if the session is early in the morning or late in the day). If in a large room, try to **project** your presentation, that is: speak loudly enough.

2.4 Don't speak too quickly, but keep your pace with your audience and allow your material to 'sink in'.

2.5 Make frequent **eye contact** with your fellow students. Address them as your audience - not just the lecturer.

2.6 If at all possible, stand up while giving your presentation; if you prefer to sit down, try not to look down too much, or hide behind your notes. Choose a seat where you face your audience, rather than blend into it.

2.7 At the beginning of your presentation, **outline** in a few words the **aims** of your presentation. When doing a joint presentation, the first speaker should explain how the different parts will work together. It is therefore absolutely essential that you co-ordinate your part of the presentation with your co-presenters in advance, so that you avoid overlaps, or an overall disjointed presentation.

2.8 At the end of your presentation, give a short **summary** of the most important points in your presentation.

2.9 Distribute a prepared **handout**. This handout should give a run down of your presentation, preferably numbered or in bullet points, and it should have a title. In any case it should be structured, and easy to read/follow. A handout is NOT identical with your notes, but a condensation of your presentation, so don't have more than one to two A4 pages. Use illustrations only if they relate to your argument or if you refer to them.

2.10 Also list on your handout all **names** and **specific terms** you mention in your presentation, particularly those that your audience may find difficult to note down without seeing them spelt out (i.e. foreign names, words, etc.).

3 Illustrating your argument

3.1 A presentation is usually a timed exercise, and you must therefore **select** your material carefully so that it fits into the time allocated. Depending on your time, choose a selected number of **key points**, rather than attempt to cram everything you've read into your presentation. If there is too much, this will be likely to result in information overload for your audience.

3.2 Concentrate on **arguments** or **developments**, rather than simple facts. The presentation should encourage your audience to think, and to follow this up with a discussion.

3.3 When possible, illustrate the ideas or techniques using (data) examples, possibly showing R-code as well.

3.4 Aim to make your presentation more interesting by using **visual aids, such as writing on the black board, using overhead transparencies or a powerpoint/pdf presentation**. The most important thing about these is that they need to be *tied in* with your presentation:

- If you use the blackboard, make a **planning beforehand** about what you will write where. Make sure your writing is clearly visible, also for students in the back of the classroom.
- Choose transparencies or powerpoint/pdf slides to display items such as definitions, theorems, key points, graphs, grids, statistics, illustrations, and photos.

Don’t write too much on one transparency/slide, and make sure that everything is **clearly visible and readable**.

- Have your visual aids ready to use, and in the right order.

- Introduce visual aids and speak to them. For example, you could say: *I am now going to show you... What I want to show you here is...*

- You can use the computer to illustrate R-code. Make sure the font size is large enough.

4 Preparing yourself for the presentation

4.1 Before the presentation: make sure you are familiar with the room where you are giving your presentation, and with any audio-visual equipment you will be using. Make sure you are close to your equipment, and that you face the audience.

4.2 **Rehearse your presentation** at home or in a lecture room (when you are planning to write on the blackboard). If possible, ask friends to listen to your performance, and ask them for advice which parts may still be a bit unclear.

4.3 When rehearsing your presentation, **time it with a watch**, to make sure you are within the limits you’ve been given.

4.4 Do your last rehearsal at the latest the evening before the presentation. Have a good night’s sleep, avoid getting anxious, and don’t think about it until the moment of the presentation arrives. And do remember, your seminar tutor is always there in case you get stuck.