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**Abstract**

Explicit, detailed outlines are standard fare in RPs and, as a result, are often incorporated into CPs as a core presentation ‘move.’ But does the multimodal, real-time nature of the CP demand such an approach, particularly when it comes to FP/PSs? This chapter questions the role and function of explicit CP outlines. My observations suggest that effective CP presenters often minimize or completely bypass the use of explicit verbal outlines and instead either incorporate the outline into an extension or paraphrase of the title slide or by reformulating (usually through reduction) the presentation outline information that is visible to the audience as written slide text.

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**14.1 Are Explicit Conference Presentation Outline Slides Really Necessary?**

As mentioned in the preceding section on opening gambits, giving a paraphrase or general statement regarding one’s general topical focus while displaying the title slide appeared to be an effective means of establishing an initial rhetorical flow in the CP. Perhaps then, a pertinent question is whether an explicit CP outline, whether visual or spoken, is necessary to anchor the various research questions, methods, and findings that follow. Given the need to develop an interpersonal dialogue in order to establish rapport with the audience, but also taking into consideration the expectation of epistemological over interpersonal contents in FP/PSs, along with the brief time allotted for such presentations, one might well question if explaining a lengthy or complex outline runs the risk of taking up too much time and thereby inhibit the flow of more paramount research content.

In fact, I observed presenters on several occasions spending more time explaining what they were going to talk about—based on an outline slide or slides—than they did on any subsequent individual content slide. Moreover, in several such cases, the speaker was explaining a discourse structure that would be considered standard formulae to an audience of peers (*‘First I will begin with the background of the experiment, then I’ll explain the methods we used...’*). By stating that which would be already known or otherwise obvious to the audience, they were violating the norms of the interpersonal dimension between presenter and audience. As Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet (2005) observe, ‘It is worth noting ... that indications of structure and scope tend to be brief in the CP, as the peer audience would no doubt perceive speakers who labor these points as adopting a ‘lecturer’ style more suited to didactic discourse’ (p. 55), and, as Heino et al. (2002) observe, ‘... speakers addressing an experienced audience also take it for granted that the listeners are fully aware of the canonical composition of research reports, and therefore want to save time by ignoring the explicit signals of the superstructure.’ (p. 131).

More effective presenters thus often bypassed showing any explicit outline slide and simply delved into the research narrative, confident that the direction and movement of the presentation could be conveyed by other means than an explicit visual outline slide—such as the use of transitional discourse markers (as will be discussed in detail in Chap. 16).

In fact, an argument could be made that explicit and detailed verbal outlines actually *discouraged* the later usage of explicit transitional discourse markers. In many such cases, it appeared as if the RP formula had been supplanted fully into the spoken dimension without due consideration to the differing modes of speech and the vagaries of conference speech events, imbuing the CP more with an aura of a PhD defense than interaction with peers in the discourse community.

In 13 cases I observed, while the outline slide consisted of some type of visual geometric model of the CP flow and direction, the accompanying spoken text was summarized in just a few short utterances. Prominent among these were the following forms:

*Today I’ll just focus upon X.*  
*Let me talk mainly about X.*

Such ‘reduced speech’ outlines managed to offer the audience a rhetorical guidepost without inhibiting the flow of the presentation or further prolonging the transition to the actual research narrative. In such cases, the presenter was able to effectively maintain the flow of the presentation.

Many of the opening gambits mentioned in the previous chapter, if used effectively, would in fact render the outline redundant, as the format/flow/direction/scope of the CP has already been implied in the opening gambit. Moreover, in a short FP/PS presentation, there often simply isn’t enough time to provide a thorough outline. For a more in-depth, lengthy CP—such as keynote/invited

speeches and plenaries or particularly complex specialized sessions, this would be fitting, but not for the standard under 20-min FP/PS presentation.

In cases where the speaker *did* need to explicitly clarify sections or categories, the more effective speakers tended to do so by highlighting explicit headings at the top or beginning of each transitional slide. For example:

1. *Early manifestations*
2. *Mid-term manifestations*
3. *Late manifestations.*

I would recommend, however, that novice presenters *not* place these headings on an ‘outline’ slide per se and then explain that one will cover them later in the CP. Rather, it would be preferable for the speaker to just ‘do it’—meaning the speaker should actually *talk about* the highlighted content as they naturally occur within the CP narrative. Thus, when the speaker arrives at the slide about ‘Manifestations,’ this category already appears as a header on the slide and the speaker can therefore proceed directly into the discussion without explicit outlining or introduction. In the example in which ‘Early Manifestations’ was visible as a slide header, the speaker did not explicitly use either of these terms but instead said: ‘*Ok. Early in the process we can expect to see...*’

Other general discourse markers also served to replace formal outlines. Prominent among these were:

*I’m going to start with X.* (note that this generally followed immediately after the opening gambit)

*I’d like to go over X and Y.* (often used when explaining research backgrounds)

*Today I’d like to focus upon X.* (used to emphasize a specific research area or scope)

*Let me talk about* (some specific area or point).

*This is how I will be proceeding today.* (while gesturing to the screen and following with a short silence to allow the audience to absorb the accompanying graphic)

The last item listed above was particularly effective when accompanied by some type of physical outline or frame on the presentation slide. Since less visual clutter in a short presentation is generally better, a simple flowchart often worked well here—negating the need for the speaker to repeat every item appearing on the slide.

Even if the speaker does not choose to present a detailed, formal outline, the need to explain hypotheses, methods, or various protocols and exigencies connected to the research remains. Often, when outlines were omitted, these moves were paraphrased in the CP narrative. Among the most frequent and effective of these that I observed were:

*First, let me go over our research methods.*

*The purpose of this study was to...*

*Let me explain our methods. First we did X followed by Y*

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*First of all we have/had to consider X*  
*In order to find out why X, we...*  
*We'll focus on the question why.*  
*Because it is important to identify X., we...*

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## 14.2 Outlines and Pacing

There is a famous scene in the 2014 movie ‘Whiplash’ in which an ambitious jazz drummer student is asked by his intimidating and sadistic teacher to take over the kit for the first time during a full band rehearsal. He is told to just play along, with ‘no pressure,’ but almost immediately the teacher stops the piece to tell the drummer that he’s ‘rushing it.’ A few moments after adjusting the tempo and restarting the tune, the teacher stops it again, and this time claiming that the drummer is ‘dragging it.’ Becoming increasingly exacerbated in subsequent attempts to get the tempo right, the teacher alternately shouts out ‘rushing’ and ‘dragging’ until the scene explodes into a violent fury.

Presenters can easily fall into the trap of alternately rushing and dragging a CP, and in doing so exacerbate an audience. Opening nerves can easily lead to rushing background information or research questions. This is particularly pronounced when the speaker is attempting to establish some kind of interpersonal rapport or other form of stage-setting but speeds through the process.

A particularly common example of CP dragging occurs when an item has already been revealed on the slide so that it is visible to the audience, but the presenter insists upon giving it a lengthy preamble, as if new information is just about to be revealed, upending the natural order of the discourse and frustrating the audience: ‘We know, we know! Get on with it!’

However, in most cases I observed, dragging was due to an overelaborate opening, often detailing already well-established background information or verbalizing outlines by stating the obvious. Both of these habits also had a ‘dragging’ effect on the audience. Often, this caused the presenter to fall behind time, and then, when suddenly realizing that they had only 2 min left to discuss the remaining fifteen slides, moved into ‘rushing’ mode.

Inevitably, such presenters, after expressing surprise at how they had fallen behind time, proceeded to fly through the remainder of the CP, including the crucial results, discussion, and conclusion sections, giving only fleeting moments of attention to the most significant findings. This effectively negated the entire impact of their research presentation since little of substance would have been absorbed by the audience.

Another characteristic of dragging is the tendency for some presenters to verbalize all the written data appearing on the slide rather than prioritizing the key items. Not only does this waste time, but it can also have a negative impact on audience comprehension, with equal weight given to data that has little or no importance in terms of advancing the narrative.

One way of addressing this habit of being ‘comprehensive to the point of incomprehensibility’ that I have used successfully with learners is to bring up the case of pilot airplane announcements. How does this work? Typically, a pilot’s address to passengers includes (1) a welcome or greeting, (2) current height of the flight, (3) expected flight conditions, (4) wind speeds and/or outside temperature, (5) type of aircraft, (6) expected arrival time at the destination, (7) temperature and weather conditions at the destination, and 8) an invitation to ‘relax and enjoy the flight’ as a closing. However, which of these items of information are of real concern or interest to passengers? Responses will vary, but I would suggest that items 2, 4, and 5 are only of interest to aviation personnel or aficionados. These could be easily dropped from the pilot’s monologue in terms of maintaining helpful passenger service. The same principles can be applied to academic presentations.

The unfortunate propensity of many young academics to treat CPs as if they were Ph.D. theses dissertations or oral defenses was also most apparent in the outline section. Novice presenters often backgrounded research with numerous topical mini-histories, fully accredited quotes, and APA-styled references that served little purpose in advancing the oral narrative, as they too closely emulated the mode of the written RP (where such data is crucial in establishing the veracity of the research).

In many CPs, this type of academic ‘proof-texting’ simply interrupted the flow of findings or narratives of the research process—the very content that a conference audience is likely to be paying most attention to. This occurs because a CP has a different epistemological function than an RP. With CPs, the audience wants to hear results and interpretations, the impact upon and applicability to the field in question, and therefore, there must be some novelty value expressed. As a result, most effective CP speakers limited the amount of background knowledge.

While some presenters insist upon completing their CP exactly as previously planned and practiced, not wanting to omit any item that might be considered at all pertinent (as they plan to include in the RP version), readers of this book might want to consider that overelaborate outlines may be the most common cause of that perennial CP scourge: going overtime. If one section of a CP can be cut to maintain pace, establish flow, and keep within one’s time limit (and the presenter’s allotted time should always be treated as sacrosanct), it is likely the outline section.

Often included in outlines, and frequently displayed immediately after the title slide, are COI ‘disclosure’ slides, which are particularly common in medical CPs. These need not be verbalized or explained, as they can momentarily impede the flow of the CP. Such slides tend to function best when displayed only for formality’s sake—for about one second—and without any accompanying spoken commentary.

**Questions and Exercises for Chapter 14**

1. In what cases might an explicit outline be beneficial for a CP and in what cases might it be a hindrance?
2. Give three examples of what a presenter can say or do rather than simply read the same outline text exactly as it is presented on the slide.
3. How might the inclusion of an outline slide or slides negatively affect the pacing of a CP?

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**References**

- Carter-Thomas, S., & Rowley-Jolivet, E. (2005). The rhetoric of conference presentation introductions: context, argument and interaction. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 15(1), 45–7.
- Heino, A., Tervonen, E., & Tommola, J. (2002). Metadiscourse in academic conference presentations. In E. Ventola, C. Shalom, & S. Thompson (Eds.), *The Language of Conferencing* (pp. 127–146). Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang.