Advice to USENIX authors: preparing presentation slides

Congratulations on being asked to give a talk! Since you will most likely be using overhead-projector transparencies or 35mm slides, this document will help you prepare an effective presentation.

The most important thing to consider is “how will my slides help the audience understand my talk?’’ People cannot absorb too many facts from a 25-minute talk, no matter how good a speaker you are. Concentrate on the key points of your paper, and create your slides to help the audience follow them. Keep them simple! Talks are usually given in a room that might hold 300-2,000 people and many in your audience will be dozens of rows away from the screen. Simple, easy to read slides are essential.

Note that it’s useful to provide an outline slide of your presentation somewhere near the beginning of the talk.

Use large fonts and don’t try to fit more than about 6 to 10 lines of text on each slide (see figure 1). If you have 10 lines of text in a tiny font with lots of white space between them, they won’t be very readable (see figure 2). However, leave enough space between lines to allow easy reading (see figure 3). For overhead slides, 24-point fonts are a good choice for the main text; headings should be larger.

35mm slides are usually much dimmer when projected than overhead transparencies. This makes them harder to read, so use even larger fonts. Put something on each slide and don’t waste space with large corporate logos; you aren’t giving a marketing talk.

You might consider using a sans-serif font (such as Helvetica) instead of a serif font (such as Times Roman). This is a matter of aesthetics, but the sans-serif fonts are often more readable at a distance.

If you are using transparencies, you might want to use “portrait’’ orientation; that is, with the long dimension running vertically. (35mm slides are almost always used in “landscape’’ orientation.)

Most of the audience will not be able to see the bottom of the screen, so put things in the top two-thirds of the slide, and leave the bottom blank (except for page numbers). Always number your slides, in case they get out of order.

This is a Good Slide

Large fonts (24 points)

Or perhaps use a sans-serif font

Reasonable spacing between
lines and paragraphs

Not more than 10 lines

Uses the top 2/3 of the page

Figure 1: Good choice of fonts and spacing

This is a Bad Slide

Small fonts (14 points)

excessive spacing

ses the bottom of the page

Fgure 2: Poor choice of fonts and spacing

This Is A Bad Slide

The text on this slide is in an otherwise readable font, but there is too little spacing between the lines, and it is far, far too verbose. You really should not expect people in the audience to read full sentences while they are trying to listen to you give a talk at the same time. It is also quite hard for someone in the audience to identify the important point on this slide, since each of the many words has about the same visual emphasis.

Figure 3: Poor choice of spacing, and too verbose

Some speakers use the whole page, intending to slide the transparency on the projector to reveal the lower half when it becomes relevant. This is usually a bad idea; speakers often forget to move the transparency or it slips off the projector, etc.

At most conferences you will usually need to rely upon someone else to change your slides. Don't ask your slide-turner to do "reveals'' (that is, covering part of the slide with an opaque sheet, so that the audience can't read ahead), and don't bother with overlays. In lieu of overlays, use two or more individual slides, each showing a complete stage of the diagram you are presenting.

If you use overhead transparencies in "landscape'' orientation, make sure that your text does not run past the horizontal margin of a standard overhead projector.

If your slides include diagrams, they should use fat lines and large fonts. Thin lines disappear pretty quickly (see figures 4 and 5).

You might have graphs showing how some quantity varies as a function of some other quantity. Make sure the curves use fat lines; if you have multiple curves on one graph, either use obviously distinctive line styles, or (perhaps better) clearly contrasting colors. Label the axes with large fonts, including complete scale information. Be honest: don't play games with the scale or origin in order to make your curves look better than they really are. (See figure 6.)

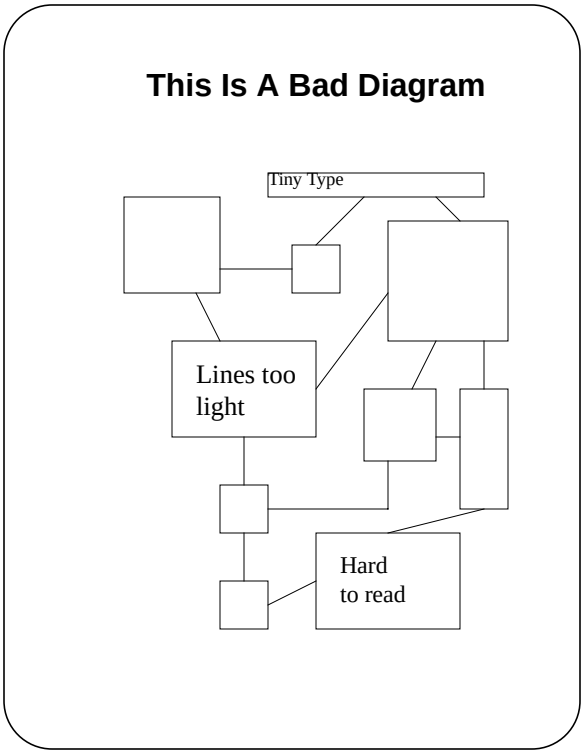

Figure 4: Poor diagram style

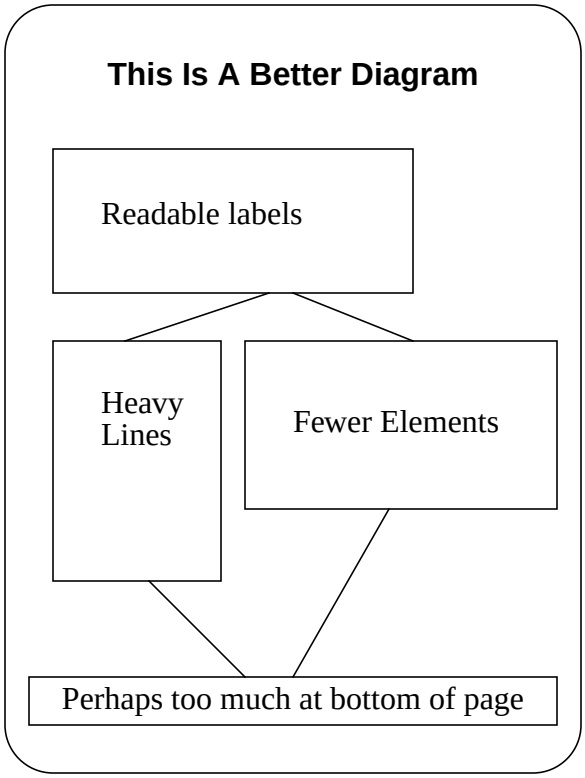

Figure 5: Better diagram style

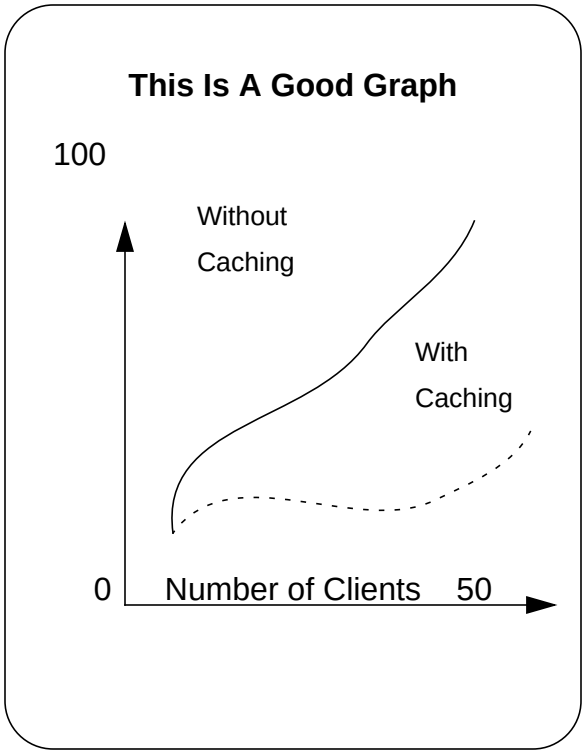

Figure 6: Better graph style

Remember, many people in the audience cannot see the bottom of your slides. Don't scale your graphs so that all the interesting stuff sits at the bottom (see figure 7).

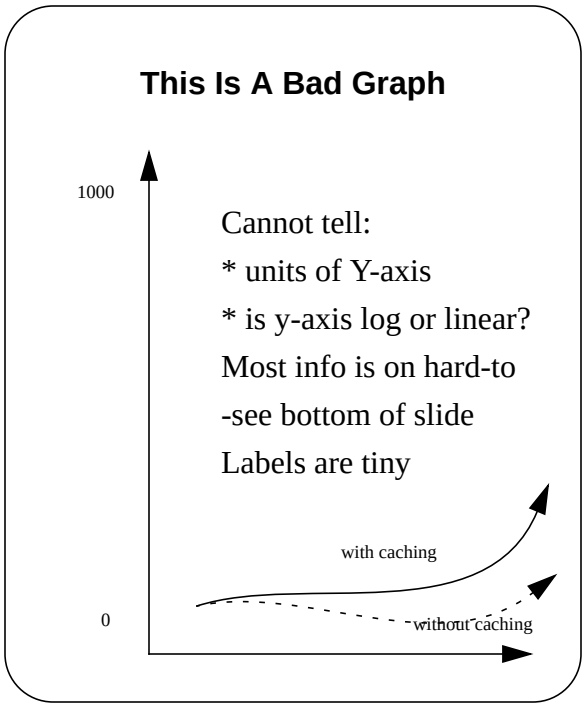

Figure 7: Poor graph style

Color can be helpful, if used with restraint. Try to limit the number of colors used in the text of your slides, and use color consistently. You can use color more aggressively in diagrams to categorize graphical elements. In graphs with multiple curves, contrasting colors are probably more effective than different line styles. If you create your slides with commercial slide applications (e.g., PowerPoint, Freelance), you should avoid using color for the background; leave the background clear, and use color to emphasize elements on the slide. Use of colored backgrounds often makes slides illegible in large meeting rooms, due to insufficient power in the projector, insufficient contrast in the room, or other factors.

You should also give some thought to the flow of your talk. Start with just enough preliminary information to make it clear what you are talking about, and why. Be clear and explicit at the beginning, including a quick outline and an indication of what makes your talk interesting. Your audience might wander off if they can't see early on that there's a good reason to stay.

Don't waste a lot of time on preliminaries; you might run out of time before getting to the juicy stuff and session chairs are notoriously strict about enforcing the schedule.

Put the interesting stuff in the middle of the talk, where it belongs. Save the "boring" stuff (apologies for unfinished implementations, long lists of related work, variations and future work) for the end. Don't feel compelled to justify every minor statement during the main part of the talk; you have presumably justified them in your paper. If people challenge you during the question period, you can make your justifications then. Of course, don't leave your most important or controversial statements unjustified.

Keep your summary and conclusions brief. Don't recapitulate all the points made in the talk; emphasize the main concepts that you want the audience to remember. If you run out of time, skip this slide, since it doesn't say anything new.

If you have software, documents, or other stuff available, don't give it at the beginning of the talk. Make up a slide with the appropriate addresses and file names (in a big font, near the top of the screen!) and leave it up during the Q& A period; this will give a chance for people to write down the information.