

“You’re on mute” and “Can you see my screen?” How to give an effective online presentation

Over the past couple of years, the RSA have been committed to continuing the regional studies discussion and debate by organising and hosting online events in the form of meetings, webinars and eFestivals. It has been, as for many others, a steep learning curve. We know that many of you will be considering how best to present your research to an online audience, either soon or in the future, so we would like to share some handy tips we’ve gathered.

Test your video and audio before your session.

We always recommend you attend a pre-event rehearsal with organisers, your Chair and other presenters. This is particularly important if you are working from a new space in your home or office. Zoom has a handy feature at <https://zoom.us/test> where you can test your settings without joining a real call.

Wearing headphones helps everyone

We recommend presenters wear headphones. This is not only clearer sound for you but less background noise for everyone else. We prefer wired because wireless Bluetooth headphones can sometimes lag, but wireless are still better than no headphones.

Microphones give clearer sound

We suggest an external mic ideally, but a headphone with built-in microphone is fine. Note that a challenge with a mic mounted in-line with headphone wires can sometimes pick up sound as it brushes across your clothing. You can avoid that by holding the cable in your hand so that the mic is not touching your clothing or skin. The built-in microphone in a laptop is not recommended as these are the lowest quality and will pick up all sounds around you, making it hard for the audience to hear you.

Get your presentation space ready.

Even though you won’t be in the same room as your audience, that doesn’t mean that you don’t need to think about the space behind you that you’ll be sharing. Adjust your background and make sure there’s nothing visible that’s unprofessional or distracting.

Position yourself on the screen

Don't position yourself in front of bright windows, which puts you in shadows. A window or a lamp facing you gives the best effect. Raise your laptop so the camera is at eye level or higher, so your webcam is not sitting lower than your face.

Turn off all notifications

You don't want notifications, sounds or pop-ups from email, Facebook, Twitter to happening during your presentation. Put your phone on silent. If you can present from somewhere reasonably quiet you will be less likely to be distracted by external factors.

Consider what you are sharing

Be aware of sharing sensitive information. We recommend you close everything on your computer except for Zoom and your presentation. When you are sharing a screen don't forget your screen might become momentarily visible – it is easy to accidentally share personal info either in the background or on your screen. Tidy up your computer quickly by moving any desktop files into one folder.

Be prepared

Send your presentation to the organiser and the Chair beforehand. This gives the Chair notice of what to expect and the organiser can use your presentation as a backup in case of technical issues.

Connect with the humans when you go 'live'

When you present in an actual conference room, chances are you start with casual small talk to build a connection between you and your audience. You can do the same before a virtual presentation, take a minute to acknowledge the humans present by greeting them. Remember you are on camera - it's not unusual to forget that you're being watched. If you're scanning papers, it might look like you're not paying attention. It's also easy to focus on watching your own image instead of looking at the camera. To prevent this, simply stick a note above your webcam that reminds you to "Look Here!".

Compensate for missing signals.

Not seeing an audience can make things more confusing to present Recording yourself give the presentation as a video beforehand is a good way to test dealing with the lack of audience. This video could also be a fallback in case everything breaks down Not having body language to back up your message can be a tricky part of remote presentations. Shifts in posture, gestures, and vocal nuances are harder to pick up on video. Smile. All you have is your voice ... so make the most of it to guide the audience.

Make sure your presentation is online- friendly

Giving presentations online rather requires thinking about how to design slides and keep remote audiences engaged when they're facing distractions and inevitable technology issues. It's important to try to be more interactive when you are presenting online. Ask questions, do surveys, allow people to engage in chat and find a way to check that at regular intervals.

Pick up the pace.

Attention spans dwindle during virtual presentations. You don't need to cut the amount of your presentation content, but instead spread it over more slides so there is more frequent on-screen change for audiences. It may be useful to consider inserting regular audience polls or a short Q&As into your presentation. But at the same time remember that not everyone might have English as their first language so be clear and explain acronyms etc.

Consider slide contrast issues and viewer screen size.

Assume that many will be viewing your online presentation from smaller laptop screens or mobile devices. Design your slides as if you're creating them for viewers in the back of a large auditorium. Use larger fonts and plenty of white space, and don't put things near the edges of your slides. Remember that light colours can easily wash out online, so stick with high-contrast colour designs, and avoid using subtle tone variations that can be difficult for virtual audiences to see.

Using sans serif fonts (like Calibri, Verdana, Arial) and dark coloured text on light (not white) single-coloured backgrounds is helpful for any dyslexic viewers you may be speaking to.

Be proactive in guiding audience attention.

Assume that some people are multitasking during an online presentation. Consider what the audience is taking away if at times they only glance at what you're presenting – it might be an idea to make sure the titles on your slides are more descriptive and capture the main point of the slide.

Unnecessary flair can cause technical problems.

The use of animation and complex transitions on slides might can cause problems online. Web conferencing platforms handle slide upload and display differently, and it's best to go simple when designing slides, keep file sizes low, and avoid the use of animations or complicated transition techniques between slides.

Have your slides open and ready to share

This one sounds simple but having the things you need to hand will save you time and stress during your presentation. If you are speaking from notes, consider printing them off or using a second screen. Take care that you are sharing the presentation and not the speaker notes – it is worth checking before the start of the event.

Rehearse your timings

Watch the clock. Try not to overrun as your audience will have scheduled a specific time for your presentation and may disappear at the end of that time. Make sure you have plenty of time for what you would like to say – plus a couple minutes extra just in case. It is always advisable to have a large clock in front of you (not the tiny computer one) to make it easy to track time.

Be instructive

If you would like your audience to read a slide or think about something specific, be clear with an instruction, and give them a chance to fulfil your request.

At the end of the session

We have all experienced the Zoom curtain going down – one moment we are looking at people's faces, and then suddenly everyone has gone. We like to suggest that as the session draws to a close, you look at the camera, smile and give a small wave goodbye. This prepares people and softens the ending.

What if something goes wrong?

Remember we all make mistakes, and sometimes something totally out of your control can happen. Whatever happens, remember your audience is human too, and many of us have experienced disaster whilst working outside of our normal environments. We all know that sometimes working and presenting remotely means planning for the unplanned.

People will inevitably experience problems with video, audio transmission or other functions in virtual settings. In most cases it's just one person, but you usually don't need to stop the whole meeting or presentation just because one person is having a problem.

We hope you find these guidelines helpful in preparing for the RSA eFestival and for the online activities you will engage in this coming academic year.