

Guidelines for Political Science Research Seminar Presentations

This brief set of guidelines is designed to enable you to use the Political Science Research Seminar (also known as the “Friday seminar”) presentation opportunity to maximum advantage. These presentations can be valuable to you in a number of respects. For the presenter, the Friday seminar should be seen as an opportunity, not an ordeal. To get the most out of your presentation, you should think carefully in advance about what you intend to present and how to present it.

Professional development

Presenting papers at conferences or seminars is one aspect of the role of an academic. The Friday presentations are a useful training exercise for presentations in the real world. They are an opportunity to learn how to present a completed or proposed piece of research and to deal with questions about it. In addition, the Friday presentations are worth taking seriously as training exercises for job presentations.

When you apply for grants and/or jobs the likelihood is that you will use staff members of the Political Science department as referees. Staff members writing such references will undoubtedly base their assessment of you partly on how well you have done your presentation(s). It is therefore worth making the effort to do it well!

This implies getting the basics right:

1. Ensure that your presentation takes the right amount of time (no longer than 25 minutes for 3rd and 4th year PhD students, 20 minutes for 2nd year PhD students and 15 minutes for 1st year PhD students). This requires some degree of preparation / rehearsal to ensure that you don't run out of words after 10 minutes, or discover after 25 minutes that you're only halfway through your material.
2. Use visualisations (for example Powerpoint slides) appropriately. Use a few to show an overview of your presentation, to emphasise major points, or to present data or illustrate a point. Avoid overusing them. Limit the number of words on the slides; they are meant as support for your talk, not as a written replication. Slides are very good to indicate the structure of your talk, and to show visual materials such as tables, figures or diagrams.
3. Present your paper rather than reading it out verbatim. Use [notecards](#) to write down the major points, using key words. Visual contact with the audience is very important, as it is with all presentations.

What to present

It is not necessary to have a completed and polished piece of work to present. Indeed, there is little point in presenting something that is completed, because then feedback is of no use to you. You should be sure to consult your supervisor / adviser in advance to discuss the content and style of your presentation.

The presentation can take several forms:

1. A piece of work in progress based on preliminary or partial results. Such a piece of work should have a clear question to address, and this question should be made very clear at the start of your presentation.
2. The outline of a research design.

The presentation should be directly related to your thesis. It should make clear what the thesis aims to do, explain how you intend to go about doing it, and (if you have progressed that far) outline the findings that are emerging.

You should circulate the paper or research proposal that you are presenting the Monday before your presentation. Send it to your discussant as well as the Research Seminar Series convener, who will circulate it to staff and Ph.D. students.

How to benefit from the presentation

If you approach it in the right way, you can gain a great deal from a presentation. The seminar provides you with the opportunity to draw on the collective expertise and experience of the Political Science department (staff and Ph.D. students), plus visiting scholars. There is no thesis proposal, or work in progress, that will not benefit from the advice and constructive criticism that will be offered by such a group. The audience that listens to your presentation should be seen as a valuable resource, a kind of large Ph.D. advisory committee that meets once a year for your benefit, rather than as a body to view with trepidation.

The Friday seminar is a good place to try out ideas that are not fully developed. The “cost” of presenting ideas that do not fully stand up is very low; if you have to make mistakes, and everyone does make them, then this is the best environment in which to do so, rather than postpone this experience to a conference in the big outside world or a job presentation. The audience at the Friday seminar is basically “on your side” – which will not necessarily be true of every other audience that you will face. Be prepared to take a few risks, to try out a few new ideas, rather than playing it safe by saying nothing that could possibly be disputed or argued about.

The constructive (or even destructive) criticism that may be offered of your presentation is something to be welcomed rather than feared or resented. Academics present their ideas to others all the time, and when they present their ideas to other academics they know they can expect questions and criticism. Criticism in this sense amounts to suggestions regarding how your work can be made stronger, and you should learn to seek it out rather than try to avoid getting it. Similarly,

when you are part of the audience, you should be prepared to offer criticism of other people's papers without being concerned that this might be seen as an "unfriendly act".

Destructive criticism may be harder to accept; but there are times when a proposal is ill-conceived or not properly thought out, and if a particular approach is simply not going to work out, it is better to be told this bluntly at an early stage than to discover this for yourself several months later after unfulfilling and time-consuming attempts to make progress. It is helpful to be steered in the right direction, and sometimes this requires being steered away from a path that is going to lead nowhere.

As well as benefiting from the questions and suggestions raised at the presentation itself, you should seek fuller feedback from your supervisor/adviser within a couple of weeks of the presentation. The onus is on you to arrange such a meeting, at which your supervisor will convey to you observations and suggestions that he or she has gathered from those who attended the presentation.

Acting as a discussant

Third and fourth year Ph.D. students will be asked to provide a discussion of one of the papers of the 1st and 2nd year students. Providing your peers with constructive criticisms is central to academic work. Like you will benefit from the input of others, you should be able to provide them with your insights. Here are a few guidelines for the discussion:

1. A good discussion is focused, not an endless list of (minor) comments. Limit the discussion to about 5 minutes. You don't have to deal with everything: there is also room for questions & answers from other participants. Minor (written) comments can always be offered to the presenter after the seminar.
2. Read the paper in advance of the seminar. Prepare your comments. If necessary, adjust your comments to the presentation.
3. Start out with the contribution of the paper or research proposal. Different people take away different things from papers, so stating explicitly what you like about a paper might help the author to focus on those issues (or to shift the focus of the paper).
4. Always be polite in your critical comments, even if you feel strongly about a point. At the same time, do not avoid problematic issues with the paper: just discuss them in a professional manner. Try not only to point out problems, but also offer workable solutions: if you were in their shoes, how would you make it work?
5. Focus on 3-5 major points, rather than 10+ smaller comments. Try to organise your comments, starting out with what you believe are major issues and only then perhaps mention a couple of smaller but noteworthy issues.