

Guidelines for Literature Seminar Presentations

The oral presentation of seminars constitutes an important and integral part of a graduate education in chemistry. An A grade is not automatically awarded for seminar presentations. Thus it is important that a great deal of effort and care be invested in the selection of the topic and the preparation of your presentation. You must show that you understand the material deeply enough to make an effective presentation and to answer follow-up questions from faculty and fellow students clearly and completely.

There are two major benefits derived by students from literature seminar presentations. First, you will learn how to locate, gather, organize, summarize, and present a body of work. Second, you will gain practice in the art of public speaking. This experience also prepares you for writing and defending your thesis. Looking ahead to your professional career, sooner or later – in class, at your thesis defense, at group meetings, in a job interview, or at work-site meetings – you will be required to present information orally.

The topic of your literature seminar should be selected with the advice and assistance of your research director. You should select a topic of interest to you, *but one that is not directly related to your research topic*. Bear in mind that you are pursuing a degree in chemistry (not biology or biological biochemistry). The focus of your presentation must be on the *chemistry* of the topic. To ensure that this is done, **you will be required to submit to me (1) the complete title of your proposed seminar; (2) a one-page abstract of your seminar, which clearly indicates the chemistry involved; (3) a proposed date for the seminar; and (4) a signed note from your research advisor indicating that he/she approves your selected topic.**

Once the topic has been selected, the relevant references must be read, digested, condensed, and arranged into a well-organized and cogent oral presentation of 30-35 minutes in length. *Any presentation that falls significantly short of this will not receive a passing grade and will require you to repeat the presentation at a later date.* On the other hand, the presentation should allow sufficient time for questions (about 10 minutes), keeping in mind that there is another class that starts at 5:30 pm. The preparation of a credible literature seminar will take a considerable amount of your time, and it should involve the active guidance, advice, and assistance of your advisor. Even experienced speakers find it necessary to revise, reorganize, and refine their initial drafts of a presentation, often many times. You cannot “whip something up” a week or two before the scheduled date of your presentation.

Your presentation should be accompanied by suitable graphical materials. Today, PowerPoint is the preferred medium for seminar presentations, although slides and overheads are still often used. The printing on the projected images should be neat, sufficiently large to be legible at the back of the room, and should not be crammed with too much information to be readily digested by the viewing audience. On the other hand, the audience should not be overwhelmed with a deluge of slides, each with little information, flashed on the screen every few seconds like a jerking movie. While PowerPoint has many “cute” features for sound and animation, these quickly become tedious to the audience and are the mark of an amateur presenter.

Once the material has been assembled, you need to prepare an effective, interesting, and

understandable oral presentation. *It is imperative that you perform many “dry run” practice presentations, preferably at least once or twice in front of your advisor, before you make your actual seminar presentation.* Practice! Practice! Practice! You must speak loudly enough so that your voice projects to the back of the room. You must speak slowly and distinctly so that you are easily understood. Seminar presentation is an exercise in extemporaneous (not impromptu) speaking. Do not attempt to memorize your presentation like a play's script, but rather have a clear sense of the points you wish to make, the order in which you will make them, and the ways in which you intend to explain the material as each slide is presented. While it is perfectly reasonable to use notes as memory aids, it is imperative that you do not read from a prepared text. Thoroughly knowing the material will go a long way in giving you the confidence to make an effective presentation with a minimal need for memory aids. If English is not your native language, ask someone who is a native speaker to listen to one of your practice presentations and point out any pronunciation difficulties that might get in the way of your audience's understanding. Be sure to speak to the audience, trying to maintain frequent eye contact with individuals throughout the room. Do not fall into the trap of simply talking to your thesis advisor or a friend sitting in the audience, or (worse) to the screen or blackboard. Try to engage your audience in your topic by showing some enthusiasm for it. Again, the involvement and help of your advisor are extremely important in the delivery of an effective, interesting, and stimulating oral presentation.

Although the prospect of making a formal oral presentation may be discomfoting to you as a neophyte, look upon this experience as an opportunity to acquire an essential professional skill.

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