At the Tampa Annual Meetings, I gave my first talk as a scientist. Leading up to the meetings, a lot of people asked me if I was nervous, to which I replied assuredly, “No.” But the more the question was posed to me, the more I began to turn the matter over in my head. I wrote this article to share my experience with other students and also to remind the more tenured of optimistic youth.

I have seen numerous presentations—the good, the bad, and the ugly. I have listened to talks devoid of results; seen interesting subjects ruined by monotonous mumblers; and, perhaps most common of all, I have experienced presenters who spend too much time introducing a subject, only to rush through the more analytical (often more interesting) parts. My greatest fear was to lull people to sleep after lunch with drab slides and subject matter that failed to add anything new or interesting to the academic conversation. I set my aspirations high and wondered how I could deliver my results with the enthusiasm, articulation, and the effortless engagement of my favorite TED Talk presenters.

In early September, I proclaimed to my labmates, “I am going to make the best PowerPoint this conference has ever seen!”

Before: The Preparation

I postponed the challenge of creating a 12-minute spiel that was holistic enough to describe my research goals until after the harvest. By mid-October, my new proclamation was, “I will somehow put together a coherent picture of my work.” I made a presentation and received feedback from my committee. Time to edit. I bemoaned (to myself), “How can I explain this topic, which took me weeks to understand, in a mere two minutes?” I presented my work to my housemates (all science graduate students) and asked for their feedback. Another round of editious revisions, my PowerPoint held little resemblance to its beginnings, and I was thankful. The lesson from preparing for the Florida trip was that learning and presenting are both cumulative and interconnected. The more often you do them for a subject, the more comfortable you become.

During: The Philosophies of Science

My session began at 8 am in a medium-sized conference room. Older men in suits filled the seats; they all seemed to know each other, and the rapport between them was genial. One after another, I listened to speakers whose research philosophies had nearly opposite to mine. And, for the first time, I worried. I felt my presentation was decent, and I was confident of my speaking ability, but now I was concerned about how my reasoning for this research would be received. Science research is objective in name, but rarely without opinions.

As the session continued, people trickled out of the room; after a while, the talks shifted out of crop management and the ecology side of the title. By 2:15 pm, the room was populated with fewer people wearing fewer suits, more beards, and a younger median age. My presentation appeared on the screen, and I eased the audience into my research by framing my priorities by its relevance to farmers. The 12 minutes passed without issue, and I finished before the moderator had a chance to stand. The lights in the room brightened, and I did my best to answer some interesting questions—a personal indicator of a talk gone well.

After: The Opportunity

The discussion that can result from a series of presentations can be a great way to get feedback, learn others’ opinions, and improve your skills. Another opportunity presented itself to me as I was at the airport on the day following the meeting. I was in a coffee shop, and a woman who had been in my session came up to me and started a conversation about my work. It was an unexpected opportunity to share the results of my research.