I would like to acknowledge the contributions and input of the participants in various “How to Give a Good Research Presentation” panel sessions at the Southern Economic Association and Western Economic Association conferences, especially the panelists: Rachana Bhatt, Jillian Carr, Courtney Collins, Monica Deza, Craig Depken, John Garen, Jac Heckleman, Brad Humphreys, Larry Kenny, Fernando Lozano, Jane Ruseski, Tino Sonora, and Artie Zillante.
This is my daughter and son on a family hike in Colorado several years ago, in front, as they usually are, even though they don’t know the way 😊 To my wife and me, we are hiking a trail to the top of a ridge, but to them, we are “mountain climbing.” Mountain climbers need hiking sticks, which they each have, and if you’ll notice, our daughter is skipping.

Most of us, when we make a research presentation, think to ourselves, “I am going to tell the audience what I am investigating, and how it fits into the literature, and what my methods are, and then my results and conclusions.” But that is the wrong way to think of it: you’re in trouble from the start. Because, like “mountain climbing,” a presentation is a journey.

I think this picture embodies what we should aspire to achieve in this journey. First there is the destination, which should be intriguing, appealing, should call to the audience as the “mountain” calls to our kids. But if you start your presentation with, “This is what I am going to do and this is how it fits into the literature,” you have drained your talk of much of its appeal.

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Next is the path that takes you to your destination. This path is your slides, which should draw people along, so that your audience are so involved that they pull you along, as it were, instead of you having to push them.

And finally there is you, the guide on the journey. And that’s the last thing this picture represents: the people “in charge” of the journey, my wife and I, are, literally, out of the picture.

I am going to describe three keys to a good presentation, which will help you make your presentation into a journey. The first key helps you properly establish the destination. The second key lays down a path that draws the audience along. And the third key delineates your role in the process, and helps prevent you from getting in front of the audience and getting in the way, or turning around and dragging them behind you to your destination--which, let’s face it, is the way most presentations go. So let’s get started.
So here you are at the introductory part of your talk. It is a moment that is pregnant with possibilities, but also the moment when many presentations falter, never to recover. So have a clear objective in mind: you are trying to establish where the journey is to. And the second you start in with, “This is what I am going to do and this is how it fits into the literature” you are dragging the audience behind you.

So let me suggest another way. Rather than tell you, I’m going to show you, by introducing another talk I have given from the past. (Every slide I will show you is from presentations I have given.) Here, I just start directly with the data. Even just looking at the points on the slide, questions come to mind! Describe the data, the plot, and then: “The relationship between these two variables allows us to uncover the effect of the incentive that we as professors have the most control over: grades.”
That is, your introduction should create a GAP in knowledge, following the “gap theory of curiosity” (Loewenstein, 1994). In the process of creating this gap, you both introduce the topic and motivate your research question. The previous slide did this simply by showing the data, but there are many ways to accomplish this, some of which will suit certain topics better than others.

Note that in order to have a gap, there must be material that surrounds that gap—you can’t have a gap in nothing. This material consists of prior knowledge, contextual information, descriptive facts. Use it to develop, construct almost, this gap in knowledge. Not only is this necessary, but it also gives your audience something to “hold on to,” to work with, as you move through your talk. Part of creating a gap in knowledge is properly setting the stage, and part of setting the stage is providing appropriate intellectual, institutional, and descriptive context.

Note also that a gap in knowledge is not equivalent to a gap in the literature. A gap in knowledge is more intuitive, more substantive, more “organic”—it takes you “out of the weeds,” all the details of your study, so you relate to your audience more naturally. This is very important for talks and for promotion of your research. You may need to add some detail about the literature, depending on the topic and the nature of your talk (brief conference presentation, job talk, etc.), but this should always come after establishing the gap in knowledge, and can usually be done in a way that does not “drag the listener behind you.”

Following are some other ways to create a gap in knowledge.
Here is another way to introduce a talk – start with the results!! The question that comes to mind then becomes, how did you get that surprising result? This, incidentally, is one way of solving the problem about meshing your study with the existing literature – point out your surprising finding, with the promise that as you progress you will show why it differs from the previous findings in the literature.

“The study, like several before it, is spawned by the famed Alcoa antitrust case of 1946. Alcoa, a monopolist in virgin aluminum, faced competition only from a competitive recycling sector producing secondary metal. A key issue in that case was the ‘recycling problem’: Alcoa could forecast and control, to some extent, the pro-competitive effect of the secondary market, through its sales of virgin. In fact, however, the recycling problem had been in a steady state for two decades prior to the case, but this was surprisingly overlooked by all previous studies of this problem. (Explain the steady state on graph, by describing the top two lines in the graph and showing that they grow at the same rate from the mid-1920s on.) The model of the recycling problem that I am going to show you demonstrates this fact and reveals how previous studies overlooked this fundamental finding.”
The previous study was a lot of theory, yet could still be factually motivated. An alternative, for a paper with wholly theoretical content, is to use equations as visuals, such as I do here, and ask: What is the essential difference between these formulas?

The top equation, though less general, is more intuitive. It boils down to a natural pricing heuristic that we all teach our majors: the markup is inversely related to the elasticity of demand. Furthermore, this equation can be directly applied to data.

And for our purposes, at least, this is the essential difference: the top formula allows you to TEST THE HEURISTIC DIRECTLY. You can’t do that with the formula on the bottom!

Yet few price setting firms sell a single product, most sell multiple products. And many use pricing mechanisms, quantity discounts, bundling, etc., that are distinctly nonlinear. It will not do to try to understand such pricing behavior with the equation on the top. So, then, how can we uncover pricing heuristics in a multiproduct context, without a clear equation to guide us that can be taken directly to data? That is the question we address in this paper. We outline a natural technique that can be utilized with limited data and little theoretical guidance.

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OK, so you now have the audience’s interest. You have your destination, and they have taken off down the path ahead of you. What about the journey itself? How do you hold the audience’s interest as you move into the body of your talk, and have them continue to pull you down the path toward your destination? The key is substantive and not gimmicky (not humor, not “bells and whistles”): excellent slides. This involves the presence of one thing, and the absence of another.
Your narrative is probably causal. So you want to structure your presentation so that the audience joins—and hopefully leads—your “causal quest.”

Exactly how you do this depends on the content of your narrative, of course. But in general, this can be accomplished by properly structuring the backbone of your presentation—your slides. You want them to be kinetic—to have movement. By this I don’t mean little stick creatures that move around or whatever—let’s not do gimmicks of any kind. Rather, present information in such a way that the viewer can search for or draw causal connections. In the process of doing so, the audience is moving down the path toward your destination, with you, in your talk, hopefully following just a little way behind.

The previous slides were each constructed that way: they encouraged you, as the viewer, to think about the material presented. In the first slide, about grades, one wonders just want the relation between the x and y variables is. In the second slide, you are wondering what the missing word (“gap”) is. In the third, you are drawing connections between the various time series presented, while in the fourth, you comparing and contrasting two different ways to thinking about pricing.

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This was no accident. In each case I was careful to design the slide to accomplish this goal: kinetic slides arise from careful design. Furthermore, if you make good slides, you won’t need many – which is OK, since your paper has all the details on everything, and reduces the number of attention-disturbing transitions. (I bet you groaned inside when you saw 1/51 on that first slide, didn’t you?) I have seen some decent presentations with many slides. But let there be no question who is in front on that journey—the presenter is, with the audience racing so as not to get left behind.

My ballpark for a 22 minute presentation is 10 slides max. For an hour and a half talk, I aim for 15. Only rarely should you need more. Is it really necessary to include all these details in your talk? Your paper has the details!
Boy is this slide kinetic. Note how the graph is carefully laid out, clearly labelled, and self-contained. Note the use of color, size, X&Y location, and “rings” to convey information: five pieces of information on each study. This facilitates the search for causal connections. In addition to these details, you can also “step back” and look at the big picture. It turns out the patterns in this literature are reproduced in two other large literatures on (other) drunk driving laws: then the question becomes, what is driving these patterns? This slide motivates your talk and reviews the literature, both in one fell swoop!
Increasingly, I don’t even use tables to display my results. The results are in the paper, in depth: it is not necessary to recreate them all on your slides.

But when I do display a table, I structure it carefully. This table has some basic coefficient estimates, just on key variables, which here are really all you need. On this table, note use of italics and color to increase readability; no extraneous decimal points, large fonts, complete labeling. Respect the resolution of the medium: use the space you have, but don’t include more information that the reader can clearly see and interpret. Cluttered slides with too many decimals, unnecessary coefficient estimates, etc., exceed the resolution of the medium and reduce the amount of information conveyed.

The clarity of the slide, its layout, and use of color each facilitate the making of comparisons, the results for youth vs. adults, for daytime vs. nighttime. This is kinetic and underlies the essential point made by this paper. It allows the audience to lead the journey to your destination.
Even in general or conceptual discussion, visuals can structure your ideas and provide, in essence, a path that your audience can follow in making causal connections.

In the talk above, it is necessary to give some background of the situation I analyze. The graph comprises both a course map and a time line: shows movement, provides structure, conveys a lot of information quickly, more interesting than bullet points. The discussion of this graph sets up a point made more concretely later in the talk: there is something different about this race as you move from the 6th split to the 7th, which justifies treating the two as separate “stages” of the race.
The Third Key:

Let Your Talk COMPLEMENT Your Slides (and your paper complement both)

So now we have the audience rushing down the path you have laid to your intriguing destination. So then, where do you fit in? You do not need to get in front of the audience and start dragging them behind you, which is what you will do if your slides and your talk are redundant.

Instead, let the structure in your slides propel the narrative, so you are almost like a guide, showing the audience around something they already wish to explore. And, in order to do this, in order to eliminate redundancies, little of what you say should be on your slides. That means words and bullet points should be kept to a minimum, to essential points, background information you won’t discuss, stuff that really can’t be conveyed any other way.

You are speaking words – so make your slides different! Let them *illustrate* your ideas! Let them provide structure! Remember, you have the interest of your audience, they want to blast forward down that path. There is no surer way to start dragging them along instead than to write bullet points, face the screen, and read them. Let’s be honest: you do this for yourself, not the audience.

So…*exploit complementarities* between your spoken words, your slides, and your paper. Your slides provide structure and the essential information that allows the audience to draw causal connections; your paper has the details. So let your talk be different from both: it conveys the narrative that gently guides you and your audience forward on your causal quest.

I am now going to provide three examples of how to do this, one for the beginning of your talk, one for the middle, and one for the end.
The absolute easiest place to get bogged down in your talk—especially a job talk—is in the beginning, framing your question and how it fits into the literature. Often a full blown lit review is not needed or not feasible, because you don’t have time, it’s in your paper, and it’s not vital to creating the gap in knowledge that motivates your paper. Remember, a gap in knowledge is not equivalent to a gap in the literature.

But if you must do a lit review, get through it as compactly as possible. We have seen this already, in the bubble plot we saw earlier, and here’s another example. I admit—this slide has words. But look at what it accomplishes. It provides structure, quickly organizing the literature and illuminating its key themes. You can address the main points, without having to go through or even mention each individual study. Discussing this slide is a breeze, which is the point!

Sometimes you can even identify an element in the table where your talk fits in—and then you have a clear visual for the most important thing your introduction seeks to accomplish, and it is easy to discuss to boot.

### PREVIOUS STUDIES OF ZT LAWS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Case-Control” Analyses</th>
<th>Micro Data Studies</th>
<th>Panel Regressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generally indicate large (20%) fatality reductions</td>
<td>Mixed – some evidence of less heavy drinking</td>
<td>Youth fatalities fall by 5%, no change for adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results implausible given distribution of BAC</td>
<td>Theory predicts MORE heavy drinking!</td>
<td>Used combined day and night fatalities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As simple as it looks, this slide was not at all easy to design. It does not come directly from the paper. It does boil everything down to its essence, organizing and illustrating the ideas that I discuss in the talk.

There are, in fact, three theoretical points and three econometric points that this slide sets up or illustrates, so I spend several minutes here going through them—with nary a bullet point in sight. I begin laying out the structural parameters, posing the question: where will you find the information needed to identify them? I then answer this question, describing the equation that governs the ability-effort profile, and tying the two sources of information in blue to the three structural parameters. In each case, the slide provides some basic structure and information that I can rely on in conveying my message, while still being sufficiently kinetic that it draws the audience along.

And then, if you want to know more—the theory and identification and non-trivial and quite mathematical—that’s what the paper is for, to complement the slides and the talk.
And now to the results. We have seen one example of this before, a table. Here is an alternative, which illustrates both results and policy implications, using neither words nor tables of numbers!

I can mention the coefficient estimate (-13%) in the talk, then show its effect on the outcome of interest, both retrospectively and prospectively: what would have happened in the complete absence of the policy (helmet laws), and what would happen if it were universally adopted nationwide. Thus, along with the effect of the law, the policy implication is right there in the graph. If you have, say, three primary coefficients of interest, you can do three of these in succession. Kinetic, easy to explain, easy to transition from empirical estimate to policy implication. The structure propels the narrative.

And because each of these three slides is so simple, so easy to discuss, you can relax a little, exude some natural enthusiasm, be approachable, and relate to your audience. That’s always a good thing!—especially in a job talk.
A presentation is a journey. To make that journey as satisfying to the audience *and* to the presenter, you don’t want to be dragging your audience behind you. Which is what you will be doing when you have lots of slides with long lists of bullet points, and you turn and face the screen and read them. When we do that we are putting a protective cushion around ourselves that may give us comfort but that insulates us and isolates us from our audience, and their interest flags and their attention wanders.

Instead, give yourself and your audience a chance to connect. I can tell you, it is pretty thrilling to stand before your audience, draw them in with the gap in knowledge that you have created, watch their peering interest as they decipher causal connections in the information you present, as you help guide the audience to the satisfying conclusion of your narrative.

I am not going to lie – the first couple of times it can be kind of scary. But the structure of your talk, contained in your slides, is going to help you. The opening, creating a gap in knowledge, will rarely be technical, so you can start on territory that is comfortable for you and your audience. Identifying the core point of your talk, phrasing it as a question, a gap in knowledge that needs to be filled, and designing slides to motivate that question – that’s not easy. But once you have done so, those slides will help you start strong and connect with your audience.
And then the rest of your talk, your slides are full of pictures – OK, discuss the pictures, that’s not hard. You don’t have lots of slides to cover, because each slide is highly informative and you’ve left out extraneous material, which is in your paper. So now you can slow down a little. You can pause. You can breathe. You might even enjoy yourself a little!

We live in a world of ideas, so let’s make that world as fascinating as we can. Why should we settle for anything less?