How and why did I participate in the 3MT?

Last year, I went to watch the UVic 3MT final competition. Three Minute Thesis (3MT™) is an internationally recognized research communication competition. The experience was phenomenal as hundreds of people came to watch students from all departments condense years of work into a 3-minute pitch. The interest that people outside of academia showed was inspiring and as I listened to all those brilliant students talking about the bigger impact of their work, I was inspired to participate in the 3MT. The whole time I was there, I kept thinking of ideas for my own 3MT.

The three-minute limit encouraged me to be very focused and present - to be very ‘in the moment’ - and to make the most of every moment. As researchers, the work we publish uses specialized jargon, which is necessary for us to discuss specific problems, but isn’t accessible for the public. Participating in events like the 3MT gives us an avenue to convey our work to people outside of our field. We can take a step back and look at the bigger picture: Why should people outside of this field care about our work? What’s the real goal? Even the process of writing a speech for the 3MT is rewarding as it gets us to consider such questions.

The #1 thing that blew me away about this competition was not only getting better at presenting my own material; but also, hearing everyone else’s. The breadth and depth of research going on in our university is just stunning. As researchers, it’s easy to get lost in our little bubble of specialization, and the 3MT is a great way to hear concise, amazing stories from all different fields of study.

How did I prepare myself?

I had no idea how hard it would be to produce a talk that was exactly three minutes. As a graduate student, I’m used to 10-minute talks about my research and where timing is flexible. It took a lot more preparation than I had thought to get my timing down.

The first step was to determine how to tell the story behind my research and why it was important. Preparing my mini-talk was a lot of fun. I still remember asking my friends—Hey, do you have three minutes? —So I could practice. I am very grateful to my friends, my supervisor and the Center for Academic Communication at UVic for their input and support as I moved through the competition.

After I felt content with what I was saying, my focus shifted to the small details. How should I gesture, where should I use intonation, when do I refer to my slide? I then practiced my talk in front of my friends who provided insights regarding clarity and organization. I kept practicing until I got my timing right. It’s all about practice. But I think it’s important not to practice just in the same place or with the same people. It’s valuable to mix it up, so I practiced in my room, at random moments during the day, when I was having a coffee or Skyping with family. I wanted to ensure the talk was relevant to a broad audience and that I would be comfortable delivering it in any environment.
I want to acknowledge that the practice sessions organized for all 3MT participants were very helpful. The trainers are dedicated, supportive and helped build up our confidence. They helped us find appropriate terminology, tone and gave valuable feedback on which parts of our research to emphasize. There was a nice feeling of support among the competitors; many of us got to know one another through the practice sessions. It was a fulfilling process to see how the speeches (of my own and those of other students) evolved over the weeks preparing for the big day.

The competition provided several benefits (why to participate)

There are so many reasons why YOU should enter 3MT: it is fun, you’ll meet great people, you’ll learn from others and you’ll improve your presentation skills. The further you go by moving through the rounds to reach the 3MT finals, the more things get exciting!

Grad students are used to present materials to their peers and they are very good at that, but they don’t get very much practice speaking with the public audience about their research, so this is an exercise to tell an interesting, compelling story which is a great way to develop skills that they are going to need in their career work. They can apply the skills that they gain during any meeting, job interview, networking event, even on a first date! By participating in the 3MT, you will get:

1) To meet grad students from other disciplines and to learn about their fascinating research;

2) To modify your research ‘pitch’ depending on the audience and to explain it to a broad audience

3) Great presentation feedback and learn some tips from other presenters.

4) An opportunity to practice having to sum up your research in a comprehensible little pitch that you tell anyone when they ask the unavoidable question, ‘So, what’s your research about?’

The reason why graduate students are in the field that they are in is because they are passionate about what they do, so being able to translate their passionate to the public and watch them get excited about a topic which is unfamiliar to them is priceless!

Advices for students participating in a 3MT competition

Whether you are in an interview or you are networking with colleagues, you won’t get their continued attention until you can make a quick first impression. 3-Minute Thesis is all about making that first impression. In short, it will be “trailer” for your research movie.

Practice saying your speech in different ways, playing with different vocabulary, different speeds, etc. Something that really helped me was to record myself giving the speech and then listening to it to be able to improve. I think it’s important when it comes to practicing, to make sure everyone you talk to is in some way engaged in what you’re saying, because it’s important to make it relevant and interesting to everyone. One way to do that is to simplify. Only mention the key points of your work and make the audience relate to it. Write it like a story with a beginning, middle and an end.

And after all, just really be authentic, let your personality shine through when you’re giving your talk. I think when you get up on the stage, and you look in front of everyone and you realize you only have three minutes and you must hit that mark, you wouldn’t worry too much about missing a word or missing a line, because in the end, the audience doesn’t know what your talk is about!
So, if you mess up a line or a word just keep going, get through it, be confident and enjoy what you are doing!

Maryam Ahmed, 2017 3MT Finalist