Updated May 2026

Recommendations for Gruber Award Candidates

The following are recommendations for student presenters competing for the Samuel H. Gruber Award for best oral presentation. The judging panel scores candidates in seven equally weighted categories: *Delivery*, *Slides/Visual Aids*, *Background, Methods*, *Findings and Defensibility*, *Significance*, and quality of answers to *Questions*.

Table of Contents:

Page 1: Full Recommendations
Page 7: One-page Recommendations Summary
Page 8: Talk Preparation Checklist
Page 10: Judges' Rubric

Delivery

Speak clearly and at a volume that can be heard by everyone.
Your tone, pace, and volume should be natural and clear. Everyone has different speaking styles, so find a style that works for you and conveys your ideas clearly. Practice can help you find your rhythm. If your session includes a microphone, test it before the session begins and adjust your voice accordingly. Be sure to speak into the microphone so your talk is audible and accessible to everyone, including those using hearing devices or auto-captions, if available in the room.

Avoid reading from slides or speaking to the screen.
Instead, face the audience as much as you can, and use natural, meaningful gestures to engage them. If eye contact feels difficult, try looking at friendly, encouraging faces in the audience or gaze slightly above their heads to simulate engagement. Practice can help reduce reading from slides.

Use humor carefully and professionally.
If humor comes naturally to you, it can make a talk engaging but keep the focus on clarity and credibility. Avoid sarcasm or humor that could be misinterpreted or create discomfort. Your primary goal is to inform and share your work with the audience.

Respect the time limits.
Your presentation is allotted 15 minutes total: 12 minutes for the talk (including acknowledgments) and 3 minutes for questions. Practice with a timer to stay within 30 seconds of the 12-minute mark. Time management is part of good communication.

Practice ahead of time.
Strong communication skills are learned, not innate. Most effective presenters spend lots of time rehearsing their words, slide transitions, and timing. Practice your presentation for a friend or your peers ahead of time; they may have helpful feedback to improve your presentation and delivery. Additionally, recording a video of your practice talk and watching it can help you notice things to improve, whether it is volume, posture, pacing, or gestures. For some speakers, writing a script or rehearsing transitions between slides can help improve flow and reduce filler words, such as “um” and “like.” Most conferences also have practice rooms available to become familiar with the technology setup, including the type of remote/clicker/laser used.

Slides/Visual Aids

Make your title slide inviting and engaging.
The title slide forms the audience’s first impression of your talk, so use it to spark interest. Consider including a compelling image of your study species, study location, or a stylized representation of a key result you will discuss later. Choose imagery that reflects the substance of your presentation and invites curiosity without relying on humor, pop culture references, or context-specific metaphors that may not be universally understood.

Coordinate visuals and speech.
Your slides should enhance, not duplicate, what you say. Aim for a clear connection between spoken content and what is on the screen. Like a well-edited documentary, effective slide design and transitions help your audience follow the flow. Use careful slide sequencing and simple animations to synchronize content and speech in a way that is intuitive and supports comprehension for all audience members, including non-native English speakers or neurodiverse attendees.

Use text sparingly and clearly.
Text on slides should be minimal, high-contrast, and legible from the back of the room. Use large fonts (body text should generally be ≥18-24 pt) and consider using accessible sans serif typefaces such as Arial, Helvetica, or Calibri. Ensure that text matches or paraphrases your spoken message rather than introducing entirely new information. Avoid all-caps text for emphasis. Use bold, italics, or color changes instead, and ensure color choices have strong contrast (light on dark or dark on light) for those with visual impairments or color blindness.

Use visual cues to guide attention.
If using a laser pointer, use it steadily and purposefully. As an alternative to a laser pointer, consider using built-in visual elements like arrows, boxes, or highlights to direct attention. Progressive reveal techniques (for example, fade-in or appear animations) can also help pace your delivery and reduce cognitive load. These methods prevent overwhelming the audience with too much information at once. However, animations

should be simple, purposeful, and tested in advance, especially if using a different computer at the presentation venue.

Use video sparingly and accessibly.
Video and audio clips can powerfully demonstrate methods or results but should be brief, clearly introduced, and embedded in your file to avoid playback issues. Avoid relying on video or audio for essential content in case of technical problems (or have one or more backup slides without video just in case). If possible, test video and audio playback in the presentation room (or practice room) as early as possible, to ensure each one works as expected. Always provide spoken descriptions of what is being shown in the video, or textual descriptions of what is being shown in audio, so all audience members, including those with visual or hearing impairments, can follow.

Maintain consistency and clarity.
Use consistent fonts, color schemes, and layouts across all slides. This helps reduce cognitive effort and supports a more professional presentation. Properly align and evenly space slide elements using the software's layout tools. Avoid slides with misaligned or overlapping text and graphics, which may appear disorganized or be difficult to interpret.

Respect all audience members' access to content.
Avoid placing essential information or labels in the lower third of your slides, which may be obscured by the podium or the heads of audience members, especially in larger or less accessible rooms. Avoid presenting a slide that requires an apology like, "I know you cannot see this, but…" Revise it beforehand. Always credit images and visual materials clearly, even your own, so the audience is not left guessing if they are yours.

Background

Engage and orient the audience.
Open with a compelling statement, question, or image that captures attention. Help the audience understand why your topic matters, scientifically, societally, or ecologically.

Establish a clear rationale.
Early in the presentation, articulate the motivation behind your study. What gap in knowledge, unexplored question, or practical challenge does your work address? Consider different ways of doing this, such as posing a guiding question, introducing a real-world problem, or summarizing gaps from prior research.

State hypotheses or objectives clearly.
Whether your study is hypothesis-driven or descriptive, be transparent about your goals. Label your hypotheses or objectives clearly on a slide, using concise, readable text. This helps the audience follow your reasoning and track the results later.

Show your enthusiasm.
Passion for your research can help draw people in, especially if paired with clarity and authenticity. Your confidence and curiosity will engage the audience.

Accessibility tip: Avoid jargon, when possible, especially during the introduction. If technical terms are essential, define them briefly and clearly. Aim to make your presentation accessible to non-specialists in your field as well as those with diverse cultural or educational backgrounds.

Methods

Be clear, concise, and complete.
The methods section should briefly but clearly explain what you did, so the audience can understand how you obtained your results and judge whether your approach was appropriate.

You do not need to include every detail. Focus on what is essential to understand the study design, data collection, and analysis. Assume your audience has basic scientific knowledge but does not know the specifics of your system or techniques. Your presentation should also stand on its own in that it should not rely on a previous presentation. For example, “The previous presenter gave an excellent introduction to this topic, so I am going to be brief here (or, I am going to skip to the results).” The judges are scoring a full explanation of your methods.

Use visuals to your advantage.
Use diagrams, maps, timelines, or images to illustrate complex methods. A well-labeled figure or flowchart can often replace a lengthy verbal explanation and help the audience follow your process. Use progressive reveals to help pace more complex visuals.

Justify your choices.
If your study design involved important decisions (for example, selecting a certain number of replicates, choosing between methods, or using a specific model), briefly explain why. You are not just telling what you did. You are showing that it was a reasonable, thoughtful approach.

Avoid jargon and be audience-aware.
Do not assume your audience knows the details of your protocol. Define or briefly explain specialized techniques and avoid unnecessary acronyms. If you are presenting to a general scientific audience, remember to keep explanations accessible.

Findings and Defensibility

Make data interpretation easy and inclusive.
Walk the audience through every graph, figure, or table you show. Clearly explain axes (do not forget labels), units, and symbols, even if they seem obvious. Use visual cues (for example, arrows, boxes, or highlights) to draw attention to important features. Use animations to build complex visuals gradually and to control flow. Remember also to use appropriately large and readable font sizes for axis numbers and labels.

Communicate findings, not just visuals.
Avoid titling any slide simply “Results.” Instead, state the main finding directly in your slide title (for example, “Juveniles grew faster in warmer water”). Reinforce this verbally as you explain the data. This is like a news headline, followed by the detailed article.

Keep visuals accessible.
Avoid overloading a slide with data. Only present what you plan to discuss. Hide unnecessary elements by cropping or superimposing shapes that are the same color as the background. Avoid red-green color schemes that exclude people with color vision impairments. Use high-contrast colors and consider adding shapes, patterns, or labels to make elements distinguishable for all audiences.

Explain how your findings answer your questions.
Make sure each result clearly connects to the hypotheses, objectives, or questions you stated earlier. Do not assume the audience will make that connection for you. Explain it.

Ensure data integrity and transparency.
Show relevant statistical outcomes (for example, statistical test names, p-values, error bars, sample sizes) and make clear whether differences are statistically or biologically significant. It is generally advisable to avoid large or crowded tables; summarize them.

Design with care.
Choose fonts and colors for visuals that are consistent with the rest of your slide deck. Center and align visuals to avoid a cluttered look and ensure consistent spacing between graphs and text.

Conclude with clarity.
Briefly return to your hypotheses, questions, or objectives, and offer clear, evidence-based answers. End with one or two concise summary messages that communicate the broader significance of your study. Aim for clarity and impact, using language that a non-specialist can understand.

Significance

Why should the audience care?
This is your chance to explain what your results mean in a broader scientific, ecological, social, or theoretical context. Why do your results matter to the audience? Tie your findings to relevant scientific theories or pressing questions in your discipline. If possible, relate your study to real-world issues or conservation, policy, or human-interest angles.

Emphasize the novelty and importance.
Clearly articulate how your study is original, innovative, or fills a gap in knowledge. Even if the study is small in scale, explain how it advances understanding, raises new questions, or contributes to ongoing conversations in your field.

Avoid overstating.
Be enthusiastic about your results but stay within the bounds of what your data support. If your study has limitations or unresolved questions, acknowledge them. Your credibility depends on thoughtful interpretation, not exaggeration of significance.

Questions

Plan to finish on time.
End your talk within 30 seconds of the 12-minute mark so there is at least 2 to 3 minutes for audience questions. Finishing your presentation on time and having sufficient time to answer audience questions is part of your score (see rubric).

Anticipate and prepare.
Think ahead about what questions you might be asked and practice answering them clearly and concisely. Consider preparing backup slides to help you respond to specific questions with extra data, visuals, or clarifications.

Respond with professionalism.
During Q&A:

- Listen carefully to the full question.
- Do not interrupt or jump ahead.
- Be patient and respectful, even if the question seems tangential or poorly phrased.
- When answering the question, briefly restate the question to ensure you have heard the question correctly and to re-engage the audience with your answer.

One-Page Recommendations Summary:

Delivery: Speak clearly, audibly, and at a natural pace. Face the audience rather than reading from slides. If using a microphone, test it beforehand and speak directly into it. Practice aloud, ideally with other people listening (for feedback), to refine pacing, gestures, and transitions. Respect the time limit (12 min for talk, 3 min for questions).

Slides/Visual Aids: Slides should support, not duplicate, your spoken presentation. Use minimal, high-contrast text in large, accessible fonts (generally ≥18-24 pt for body text). Avoid cluttered slides, low-contrast colors, and red–green color schemes. Use visual cues such as arrows or highlights instead of relying on a laser pointer. Animations and videos should be simple, purposeful, and accessible. Test all slides, visual aids, and presentation technology before your session begins.

Background: Begin with a compelling statement that explains why your study matters. Establish the motivation and rationale early. Clearly state your hypotheses or objectives, using concise and readable text. Avoid unnecessary jargon and define essential terms clearly.

Methods: Explain what you did clearly and concisely, focusing on essential elements of study design, data collection, and analysis. Use diagrams, maps, or flowcharts when helpful. Justify important methodological decisions so the audience can evaluate your approach.

Findings and Defensibility: Guide the audience through every figure and graph, explaining axes, units, and symbols (which should also be defined on the slide). Use slide titles to communicate key findings, not just section labels. Clearly connect results to your hypotheses or objectives. Present relevant statistics transparently and avoid overcrowded visuals.

Significance: Explain why your results matter in a broader scientific or societal context. Highlight what is novel or important about your work while staying within what the data support. Acknowledge limitations when appropriate.

Questions: Finish on time to allow for questions. Listen carefully, respond respectfully, and answer clearly and concisely.

Talk Preparation Checklist:

Use this checklist while preparing and practicing your talk.

Delivery

- ☐ I speak clearly, at an audible volume, and at a natural pace.
- ☐ If using a microphone, I have tested it and speak directly into it.
- ☐ I face the audience rather than reading from slides or the screen.
- ☐ I have practiced (ideally, multiple times) aloud.
- ☐ I minimize filler words and awkward transitions.
- ☐ Any humor I use is professional, inclusive, and appropriate.
- ☐ I finish presenting between 11 m 30 s and 12 m 30 s, leaving about 3 minutes for questions.

Slides/Visual Aids

- ☐ My title slide is visually engaging and relevant to my study.
- ☐ Slides support what I say rather than repeating it verbatim.
- ☐ Text is minimal, high-contrast, and readable from the back of the room.
- ☐ Fonts are large (generally ≥18-24 pt for body text) and accessible (e.g., Arial, Helvetica, Calibri).
- ☐ I avoid red–green color schemes and low-contrast visuals.
- ☐ Visual cues (arrows, boxes, highlights) guide attention clearly.
- ☐ Animations are simple, purposeful, and tested in advance.
- ☐ Videos are brief, embedded, tested, and described aloud.

Background

- ☐ I open with a clear, compelling explanation for why the topic matters.
- ☐ I clearly explain the motivation and rationale for my study.
- ☐ My hypotheses or objectives are clearly stated and labeled.
- ☐ I avoid unnecessary jargon and define key terms clearly.

Methods

- ☐ I explain methods clearly and concisely, without unnecessary detail.
- ☐ Visuals (maps, diagrams, flowcharts) help explain my approach.
- ☐ I briefly justify important methodological choices.
- ☐ Explanations are accessible to a general scientific audience.

Findings and Defensibility

- ☐ Each figure or graph is clearly explained (including axes, units, symbols).
- ☐ Slide titles communicate key takeaway messages.
- ☐ Results are clearly linked to hypotheses or objectives.
- ☐ I present appropriate statistics and explain their meaning.
- ☐ Slides are uncluttered and visually consistent.

Significance

- ☐ I clearly explain why my findings matter.
- ☐ I describe what is novel or important about my study.
- ☐ I avoid overstating conclusions or claims beyond the data.
- ☐ I acknowledge limitations when appropriate.

Questions

- ☐ I finish on time and allow about 3 minutes for questions.
- ☐ I have anticipated likely questions and practiced responses.
- ☐ I listen carefully and respond thoughtfully and respectfully.

JUDGES' RUBRIC:

Delivery (4 points)

Exemplary (4 pts)	Speaker communicates ideas clearly and at an understandable pace and volume. Engages the audience using clear organization, voice modulation, and confident presence. Style may be quiet, energetic, scripted, or natural: all are valid if the message is clear. Speaker avoids using notes and filler language.
Proficient (3 pts)	Mostly clear with minor issues in volume, pacing, or flow. Speaker may rely on notes or have some filler language, but message remains understandable.
Developing (2 pts)	Delivery issues (volume, pacing, disorganization, reading from slides, etc.) occasionally interfere with understanding or audience engagement.
Needs Improvement (1 pt)	Delivery consistently hinders comprehension; communication is unclear or incoherent.

Slides/Visual Aids (4 points)

Exemplary (4 pts)	Slides are visually polished and consistently formatted. Text is minimal, large, and high-contrast. Visual elements enhance clarity and comprehension. Animations or transitions are used appropriately and aid pacing. Essential elements are visible from all parts of the room. Speaker uses visuals aids to effectively direct audience attention (e.g., progressive reveals, arrows, highlights, etc.).
Proficient (3 pts)	Slides are clear and mostly consistent in style. Text is generally easy to read, though minor issues (e.g., slightly small fonts or occasional contrast problems) may be present. Visuals generally support the talk, but some elements may be cluttered or poorly paced. Most key elements are visible and labeled. Use of animations or emphasis tools is effective but may lack polish.
Developing (2 pts)	Slides contain visual inconsistencies (e.g., mixed fonts, colors). Text may be too dense, small, or low-contrast in places. Visuals may feel disjointed from spoken content or overwhelm the audience. Poor visual pacing or reliance on problematic elements (e.g., busy slides, overuse or ineffective use of laser pointer). Some critical content may be difficult to see or read.
Needs Improvement (1 pt)	Slides are visually cluttered and (e.g., elements poorly aligned, all-caps, poor color contrast, tiny text) hinder rather than support the talk. Disorganized layout or distracting animations. Key content is obscured or illegible. Presentation includes slides requiring apologies or disclaimers (e.g., "Sorry you cannot see this…").

Background (4 points)

Exemplary (4 pts)	Background is highly engaging, clearly contextualized, and understandable to a broad audience. A well-defined knowledge gap or problem is established early. Research objectives or hypotheses are explicitly stated and logically follow from the background information. Minimal jargon or clearly defined technical terms.
Proficient (3 pts)	Background is clear and informative. A knowledge gap or motivating question is present but may not be as sharply defined. Hypotheses or objectives are stated but may lack clarity or emphasis. Jargon is present but does not impede understanding.
Developing (2 pts)	Background provides general context but lacks clarity or focus. The rationale for the study may be implicit or underdeveloped. Hypotheses or objectives may be unclear or missing. May rely too heavily on jargon or undefined technical terms.
Needs Improvement (1 pt)	Background is confusing, vague, or disorganized. The motivation for the study is not established. Hypotheses or objectives are not stated. Heavy use of jargon or undefined technical terms.

Methods (4 points)

Exemplary (4 pts)	Methods are clearly and concisely explained with visuals or flowcharts that aid comprehension. Presenter provides sufficient detail about the study design and approach. Specialized techniques are briefly and clearly explained.
Proficient (3 pts)	Methods are generally clear and appropriate, though may lack visual support or omit some clarifying details. The speaker provides some detail about the study design and approach.
Developing (2 pts)	Methods are somewhat confusing or lacking key details. Visual aids, if used, are unclear or unhelpful. The speaker provides little detail about the study design and approach.
Needs Improvement (1 pt)	Methods are poorly explained or missing critical information. Visual aids are missing, or if used, are unclear or unhelpful. The study design and approach are not explained clearly.

Findings and Defensibility (4 points)

Exemplary (4 pts)	Results are clearly and engagingly presented. Each visual is fully explained. All conclusions are explicitly supported by the data shown. Hypotheses, questions, or objectives are clearly revisited and answered based on the results. Graphs and tables are well-designed and consistent with slide style. Conclusions are clear and grounded in evidence.
Proficient (3 pts)	Results are mostly clear and understandable. Visuals are mostly explained and aid in comprehension. Conclusions are generally supported by the results, though connections may not be explicitly stated. The presenter refers to original hypotheses or questions but may not fully explain how the data support conclusions.
Developing (2 pts)	Some results are unclear or under-explained. Visuals may be cluttered, inconsistent, or difficult to interpret. Conclusions are stated but not clearly tied to the data presented. The presenter references earlier hypotheses/questions inconsistently or superficially.
Needs Improvement (1 pt)	Results are confusing, incomplete, or not explained. Visuals are difficult to read or interpret. Conclusions are not supported by the results shown or are missing altogether. The presentation fails to address the original questions or hypotheses.

Significance (4 points)

Exemplary (4 pts)	Compellingly explains the importance and broader implications of the findings. Clearly shows how the study is original, fills a knowledge gap, or addresses a meaningful question. Connects to larger themes or issues beyond the study.
Proficient (3 pts)	Explains why the study is important and links findings to broader topics, though may lack depth or clarity in connecting to larger issues or highlighting novelty.
Developing (2 pts)	Touches on the significance of the study, but connections to the bigger picture are vague, superficial, or overstated. Limited explanation of originality or broader relevance.
Needs Improvement (1 pt)	Fails to explain why the study matters or how it fits into a broader context. Audience is left unsure of the value or impact of the work.

Questions (4 points)

Exemplary (4 pts)	Talk ends between 11 m 30 s and 12 m 30 s, allowing about 3 minutes for questions. Listens patiently and responds thoughtfully and clearly. Demonstrates depth of understanding. May use backup slides if appropriate.
Proficient (3 pts)	Talk ends past 12 m 30 s but leaves enough time for at least one question and answer. Answer(s) is/are mostly clear and thoughtful, with perhaps only minor issues.
Developing (2 pts)	Talk ends past 12 m 30 s but leaves enough time for at least one question and answer. Answer(s) may be vague, incomplete, or show signs of limited preparation.
Needs Improvement (1 pt)	Talk ends significantly over time such that there is not enough time for questions, or responds poorly to questions (e.g., dismissively, inaccurately, or defensively) or appears unprepared.
Not Applicable (N/A)	Presenter finished with adequate time, but no questions were asked or questions were not substantive enough to assess the response. Presenter did everything within their control. In this case, this *Questions* element of the rubric may be omitted and the average overall score calculated from the other 6 elements.

The scores from each of the 7 rubric elements (or 6, in the case of an N/A result for the *Questions* element; see above) will be averaged to give an overall score out of 4 points.

Note: Although there is no direct penalty for a talk being too short (< 11 m 30 s), it is possible that other elements above will not be fully developed or explained, potentially resulting in lower scores for those categories.