CS@VT NEWSLETTER
CS Graduate Programs

Message from the Associate Department
Head for Graduate Studies

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Every technical presentation ends with a so-called question-and-answer session, where the audience has a chance to engage the presenter face-to-face and in real time. Over the course of my research career, I have given many presentations and attended orders of magnitude more. I have also watched countless graduate students and researchers respond to questions—sometimes effectively, often painfully. In this column, I want to reflect on a few common misconceptions and best practices around answering technical questions.

Even in the ideal case—when every question is asked purely to seek clarification—answering technical questions is far from straightforward. In practice, questions in research settings are motivated by a wide range of factors, many of which have little to do with understanding the work. Nevertheless, even seemingly simple, "unloaded" questions can turn into an ordeal if the presenter operates under incorrect assumptions. Let's start there.

One of the biggest misconceptions about technical presentations is the belief that their purpose is to explain the contents of a technical manuscript—a paper, a dissertation, or a report. In my experience, this assumption is fundamentally wrong. It is physically impossible to present the full technical contributions of a 10+ page paper in a 20–30 minute talk. At best, a technical presentation is an advertisement for reading the paper. A 40–60 minute degree exam presentation is extreme to the point of absurdity, compressing years of completed work into a high-level summary.

Once you internalize this insight, an important realization follows: *you are the world's expert on the subject of your presentation.* You know more about this work than anyone else in the room. Any audience member—no matter how brilliant or experienced—must infer and guess based on the limited picture your presentation has provided. They have not "figured out" that you are a fraud. They are asking a question that seems reasonable given the mental model your talk created. When a question feels out of left field, don't become defensive. Gently steer the discussion back to the core of your work and answer from a position of expertise.

Another common anti-pattern I see, especially among graduate students, is an unwillingness to say, "I don't know." Many of us have been trained to excel in coursework, where success means mastering existing knowledge and answering questions correctly. Over time, it becomes almost unnatural to admit uncertainty; after all, we have aced exams for years. Research is different. The goal is not to demonstrate complete knowledge, but to create new knowledge. Inevitably, that means leaving gaps behind, and that is not a failure.

No one expects you to resolve long-standing open problems in a single project. The expectation is that you move the field forward, even incrementally. In that context, saying *"I don't know"* is not only acceptable; it is honest and professional. Adding *"I'd like to find out"* situates your answer squarely within proper academic etiquette and signals intellectual maturity.

Unfortunately, and not uncommonly, researchers ask questions to show off their expertise and technical prowess. The world of academia and research is often a status game in which participants feel compelled to reaffirm their intellectual standing. They want to ensure they are perceived as smart, accomplished, and still at the top of their game. Show-off questions may have little relevance to your presentation. The questioner may not have been paying attention or may lack the technical background to truly engage with the topic.

Handling show-off questions requires a different mindset. Before tackling a challenging question, first consider whether the questioner is simply trying to show off. If so, avoid reacting defensively and respond diplomatically instead. For example, imagine someone asking, *"Your approach is interesting, but would it work on Mars?"* Because the question borders on the absurd, your instinct might be to snap back—*"What Mars are you talking about?!"*—but that would only be counterproductive. The questioner may be showing off, but *not* at your expense, so there's no need to escalate. Instead, graciously acknowledge the question: *"That's an interesting idea!"* This remark publicly validates their contribution and helps bring them onto your side. You could then add, *"We haven't yet explored this technique in interplanetary settings, but before considering Mars, we'd likely start with closer destinations like the Moon. It's certainly an exciting direction for future work."*

A common variant of show-off questions involves scalability. Questions about scalability somehow always sound sophisticated and insightful, even if they're poorly grounded. Don't hesitate to admit that you haven't yet fully explored scalability, and if appropriate, speculate constructively: *"We haven't studied scalability in-depth, but if I were to speculate, I'd consider the following factors..."* This approach not only handles the question gracefully but also leaves the impression of thoughtfulness and openness.

Even more problematic are hostile questions intended to attack your research, your advisor, or even you personally. Such questions are often driven by jealousy or envy. For instance, at a conference, you may present your accepted paper, only to face hostility from someone whose paper was rejected. Feeling slighted, they might believe their work was far superior to yours and attempt to undermine you during the Q&A session.

Dealing with hostile or challenging inquiries requires a more strategic approach. In particular, hostile questions require deliberate redirection. For such situations, I suggest a method I call *Questions Aikido*. Inspired by Aikido, the Japanese martial art that focuses on redirecting an opponent's energy rather than meeting it head-on, this technique can effectively neutralize difficult or aggressive questions.

When confronted with a hostile question—such as, *"Your approach is based on a false premise and would never work in practice"*—redirection becomes essential. Instead of engaging directly with the attack, reframe the question to position yourself on firmer ground. For example, you could respond: *"I see. What you're asking is: What is the exact premise of my research, and how would it work in practice? These are very interesting and important questions."* By reframing, you disarm the hostility and shift the focus to an area where you have control. You can then confidently address your restated question, effectively neutralizing the attack. If the questioner continues to be hostile, remember that you are in control as the one on stage holding the microphone. Politely suggest taking the discussion offline to avoid further disruption.

You are unlikely to encounter hostile questions during an exam presentation, as hostile questioning is not part of the departmental culture of CS@VT. We place a high value on collegiality and treat our graduate students as junior colleagues. Even if a question from an external member feels adversarial, your advisor and committee will step in if needed. That said, once you step outside your home institution—at conferences or on the academic job market—anything is possible, and interviews can become surprisingly heated.

In the end, addressing all kinds of questions is an essential component of delivering a successful presentation. Avoiding misconceptions about yourself and your audience will give you confidence in answering questions. Methods like Questions Aikido enable you to stay composed and effectively navigate difficult questions. Every presentation is not just an opportunity to showcase your research, but also a chance to demonstrate professionalism and poise. With practice, thoughtful preparation, and a strategic mindset, you'll be ready to handle any situation that comes your way during your talk.

Dr. T

Welcome to the MEng Corner

For this week's newsletter, we wanted to showcase an MEng CSA student and what they were able to do over their break. Mingsi Liao is in her second semester within the MEng CSA program and was able to attend the Plant & Animal Genome Conference in San Diego, CA. She had the opportunity to present on January 11th, 2026 at what's considered the largest Ag-Genomics Meeting in the world!

" During winter break, I had the opportunity to attend the Plant & Animal Genome (PAG) Conference, where I was invited to present my research on AI-based approaches for monitoring animal health. Presenting at an international, interdisciplinary conference was a valuable experience, as it allowed me to share my work with researchers from diverse backgrounds and see how computational methods can contribute to real-world agricultural challenges. Being invited to present and receiving a fellowship award made the experience especially meaningful, and reinforced my interest in applying machine learning and computer vision to interdisciplinary research problems. This work was made possible through the guidance of my advisor, Dr. Rebecca Cockrum, and the support of Dr. Chris Thomas, who has been instrumental in guiding the computer science aspects of the project. Overall, the experience highlighted how the skills developed through the MEng CSA program can be applied beyond traditional computer science settings and into impactful, real-world domains. "

--Mingsi Liao
2nd Semester MEng CSA Student

Have MEng CSA questions?
Contact our GPC:
pamelau20@vt.edu

Thanks for tuning in. See you next month.
--MENG CSA TEAM

WELCOME TO 2026, HOKIES!

Department of Computer Science

TOWN HALL MEETING

OPEN TO M.S. & PHD STUDENTS

If you are an individual with a disability and desire an accommodation, please contact Kim Chiapetto
chiapett@vt.edu

Friday, February 13

3:00 - 4:00 PM
ROOM 1100
TORGERSON HALL

FOLLOWING THE TOWNHALL WILL BE A CS FACULYT-STUDENT MIXER WITH LIGHT REFRESHMENTS AND FOOD

CS | Source

Events, Announcements, and Opportunities

Feb 4 Mock Career Fair
1:00-4:00pm, 1100 Torgersen Hall

Feb 8 CS | Source Company Info Session

Feb 9 CS | Source Career Fair
1:00pm, Squires Ballroom

Feb 10 CS | Source Interview Day
8:00am-5:00pm, Smith Career Center & Torgersen Hall

Upcoming Dates & Deadlines

Mar 2 Last day to change grade option from A-F to P/F. Last day to drop individual courses.

Mar 31 Last day to resign and/or change grade option from P/F to A-F.

Apr 14 Last day to apply for Spring graduation to have your name appear in the Commencement program and to update your diploma mailing address.

May 1 Last day to apply for "WG" grade.

May 6 Classes End.

Graduate School Deadlines

Academic Calendar