

GIVING PRESENTATIONS

Use this sheet to help you:

- identify what makes great presentations
- prepare and deliver great presentations
- use a comprehensive checklist to assess presentations

5 minute self test

Before you read this Helpsheet, spend a moment thinking about what can make a great presentation. You may wish to recall a presentation that had an impact on you. Use the following headings to guide your thoughts:

- Overall content
- Introduction
- Body
- Conclusion
- Delivery
- Visuals / equipment
- Language

Introduction

Do you feel nervous about presenting in front of a group?

Presenting in front of professors and fellow students is something that fills many people with fear, especially those students who don't feel confident about their English language skills or who have rarely, if ever, presented before a group.

However, presentations are likely to be a vital part of your assessment at university. In the workplace, the ability to give a presentation effectively is also critical. And, remember, if you can't present well in an interview, you probably won't get the job.

What should be reassuring is that everyone has the capacity to present well; well enough to get a good grade and well enough to create an impact. Sure, some people seem like they are "naturally great speakers", and there is a limitless range of presentation techniques that exist and can take years to develop.

But as you begin to prepare your presentation, be aware what makes presentations great is awareness, care, effort, and practice, much more than the inherent confidence or the "natural ability" of the speaker. And remember this quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson:

'All the great speakers were bad speakers at first.'

Presentations: general tips

There are common factors that contribute to the success of presentations. It is important to be aware of these.

1. Leave nothing to chance

Check everything carefully before you speak including the room, seating, visibility, acoustics and equipment. Ensure you know exactly how everything works (e.g., overhead projectors, datashow projectors and computers). Try to go to the exact venue a day or two before the presentation. Get a feel for it. Walk around the speaking position. Imagine the faces of the audience.

2. Know exactly how to start

The first few minutes are vital. Plan the first minute of your presentation down to the last detail. Memorise your opening words if you can. This will help you sound confident and in control. It will also let you focus on gesture and presentation in those first few minutes, so you won't experience the horror of beginning by fumbling around for words.

3. Get straight to the point

Don't make the mistake of letting your introduction become long-winded and boring. Introduce yourself if necessary, outline your topic area, tell your audience what your main point will be, give an outline of the body of your talk and then get to the main ideas. Make at least one powerful statement in the first two minutes. The best way to think of a presentation is this: 1) tell them what you are going to tell them (introduction); 2) tell them in detail (body); 3) tell them what you told them (conclusion). Don't deviate from this format.

4. Talk to your audience

The best presentations can sound more like conversations. Experts refer to presentations as having a “heightened conversational style”. Refer to your audience, ask them questions, respond to their reactions, but always keep a focus for your presentation.

5. Know what works

Certain things are always popular with an audience: personal experiences, stories with a message, dramatic comparisons and amazing facts they didn’t know. Use them, but again, remember the focus of your talk. Your listeners do not need to be wildly entertained.

6. Be concise

Keep your sentences short and simple. Use deliberate pauses to punctuate your speech. You may have a tendency to “race” (everyone does if they are nervous). Control this by pausing occasionally. This helps you to gather your thoughts, but it also helps the audience to understand what you are saying.

7. Speak naturally

Don’t be afraid of some hesitation when you speak. But make sure you pause in the right places, not mid-sentence. Remember, you are not an actor trying to remember lines. A certain amount of hesitation is actually quite natural.

8. Know your audience

Know who the audience is before you speak: undergraduates? postgraduates? staff? Pitch your talk to them. Speak to your audience, not yourself. Look at them, not the whiteboard or the computer screen or the projector. Address their goals, their needs, their concerns. It should be clear that other students want to learn something from your presentation.

9. Treat your audience as equals

Never talk down (or up) to your audience. Treat them as equals, no matter who they are.

10. Be yourself

You should speak to five hundred people in much the same way you would speak to five. You will obviously need to project yourself more, but your personality shouldn’t change. Let your enthusiasm for the topic show through.

11. Take your time

Whenever you make a really important point, pause and let the full significance of what you have said sink in ... before you move on. It’s not a race to the end.

12. Don’t make a special effort to be funny

If you make a joke, don’t stop and wait for laughs. Keep going and let the laughter (if it comes) interrupt you.

13. Let your visuals speak for themselves

Good visuals are just that: visual. Don’t put boring tables of figures and long lines of text on the overhead and read them out. Stick to the main points. Experiment with three-dimensional charts, cartoons, interesting typefaces, anything to catch your audience’s interest. However, don’t go over the top with visuals (e.g., fancy screen transitions and animation). Content is the most important thing. Some peripheral things can irritate your audience and detract from your presentation.

14. Develop your own style

Learn from other public speakers, but don't try to copy them. Be comfortable with your own abilities. Don't do anything that feels unnatural for you just because it works for someone else.

15. Enjoy the experience

The secret of being an excellent speaker is to enjoy the experience of speaking; try to do this. It's a great feeling when a presentation is going well!

16. Welcome questions

When members of your audience ask you a question, it is usually because they have a genuine interest in what you are saying and want to know more. Treat questions as an opportunity to get your message across better. Questions can also be very useful in refining your thinking about the topic.

17. Finish strongly

When you are ready to finish your presentation, slow down and lower your voice. Look at the audience and deliver your words slowly and clearly. Pause, let your words hang in the air a moment longer, smile, say thank you, and then sit down.

How to prepare for a presentation

You will be nervous. This is normal and everyone gets nervous (your lecturers too, believe it or not!). Nervous energy is vital for doing a good job. Use your nervousness to your advantage, but control it so that you don't look too nervous. Remember that the audience consists of other students who also have to give a seminar. Many may be your friends. Also remember that while this may be an assessed exercise, it is also an opportunity for you to learn new communication skills. If you practise thoroughly and take it seriously, you will do a good job.

Start by writing down exactly what you wish to say. Keep it very simple and clear. Your speech should not be like an essay. If your presentation is drawn from information from written work (e.g., an essay or thesis chapter) it is best to focus only on the general ideas or one part of the essay or chapter. There is nothing worse than a presentation that your audience cannot understand.

Most presenters try to do too much the first time they have to speak. Be aware of this.

Explain things carefully for your audience. If you use technical terms, explain what they mean. Use vivid and colourful examples, use everyday experience and use interesting, imaginative ideas. Also, use rhetorical questions for emphasis, but make sure you answer the questions and don't leave them up in the air. (There is nothing more embarrassing than asking a question and getting silence in response.)

Once you have written down everything you want to say, convert your points to short key phrases that can be written on small cards. These phrases prompt you to remember what you had to say. You must keep eye contact with your audience, so don't read.

Practise in front of friends or family. Make sure that your speech sounds natural and not too rehearsed. It should almost be “conversational” in style. Using prompt phrases will ensure that your speech is not mechanical-sounding. If you read your speech, it will be a disaster. You will lose all confidence, and your audience will be bored.

Final preparation

1. Practice in front of a mirror, or better still, use a tape recorder (sound or video). Speaking to these devices is remarkably like speaking to an audience, so you'll feel nervous at first. But if you make regular practice recordings, your nervousness will leave, and you'll discover the confidence to cope with an audience.
2. Be enthusiastic about your topic. Your enthusiasm will rub off on your listeners.
3. Tightening and then slowly relaxing the band of muscles just under your ribs can help control nervousness. If necessary, do this for several minutes before speaking.
4. Keeping the same muscles tight, take a really deep breath. Breathe out and relax the muscles. Repeating this a few times immediately before you rise to speak helps to relax your vocal cords and boosts your oxygen intake.
5. Estimate the time your talk will take. Then check the actual time during a practice run. Time seems to move very slowly when you are the speaker. You'll be surprised to find the time you need to complete your talk is usually double what you expected.
6. Speak a little more loudly, a little lower, a little more slowly and with a little more breath than you do in normal speech. This will make you sound and feel more confident. Develop the strength and volume of your voice by practising at different volumes. Try it on the way to work or university! (maybe not on public transport though!).
7. Remind yourself that to others you do not appear as nervous as you feel. If you can present a confident image, your nervousness may not even be noticed.
8. Most audiences are capable of giving tremendous support if you allow them to do so. They appreciate what you are going through. They want to help. Even a hostile group will include some who sympathise with you. If you are expecting to be criticised, say so; expressing vulnerability can reduce audience hostility, because you have been honest with them. But never “rubbish” yourself or your topic.

(Powell, M. 1996, pp. 6-8.)

To be confident in giving presentations, you must practise. If you want to practise presentation skills in greater detail in a friendly environment, consider joining a local group of Rostrum: See: http://vic.rostrum.asn.au/club_mel.html

Use the checklist below to identify and note the strengths and weaknesses of presentations, of others and yours. **Tick (☐) the points that are strong and cross () the points that need improvement.**

Presentation Checklist

Overall content

- Appropriateness for audience (depth, detail, scope)
- Accuracy and relevance of points
- Strength of argumentation
- Interestingness
- Use of supporting examples, explanations, definitions, facts, figures, anecdotes etc.
- Length

Introduction

- Introduction of self (and other presenters if necessary)
- Attention grabbing starter (anecdote, quote, question, amazing facts etc.)
- Introduction of topic and presentation of relevant background information
- Statement of main argument, focus or purpose
- Overview of presentation sequence
- Request for questions to be asked at the end (if desired)

Body

- Clear and logical sequence
- Language for transitions

Conclusion

- Language to indicate impending end of talk
- Restatement of main purpose or argument
- Summary
- Memorable final comment
- Invitation of questions and ability to manage them
- Statement of thanks

Delivery

- Body language: posture, gestures for emphasis, movement
- Position: not in front of visual support or behind desk or other equipment
- Voice: pronunciation, volume, fluency, expressiveness, pauses, speed
- Eye contact: constant and ranging across entire audience
- Use of notes

- Use of humour (if at all)
- Enthusiasm
- Confidence
- Friendliness
- Dress
- Interaction with audience
- Ability to manage questions and disruptions

Visuals / equipment

- Timely issuing of handouts
- Visuals: clear, attractive, professional, consistent in design, relevant, accurate, referenced
- Appropriate references to visuals in presentation
- Audio-visual equipment and checked and ready before presentation
- Use of equipment (whiteboard, overhead projector, computer, visualiser, screen etc.)

Language

- Accurate vocabulary
- Accurate grammar
- Explanations of technical terms
- Appropriate level of formality
- Clarity of sentences and language
- Concision

References

Powell, M., (1996) *Presenting in English*, London, UK, Language Teaching Publications