

Presentation Skills

Introduction:

Being able to present your work well as a student, and later on in your job, is an invaluable skill. You have probably sat through countless talks already and looked at many posters, so you instinctively know the kind of presentation that bores you. Now is your opportunity to articulate your instincts and hone your presentation skills for both posters and talks.

Giving a talk can mean standing up alone or with a group and presenting your ideas or your project work. You can use visual aids like slides or, if you are presenting a small paper in a seminar context, have no visual aids.

In this lesson you will learn how to:

1. Design slides for clarity
2. Recognize what makes a good and bad oral presentation
3. Know how classic mistakes in oral presentations affect your audience and how to avoid them.

Before you start you need to consult the following check-list as this will influence what

Check-list: <i>Identifying what is expected in your oral presentation</i>
1. The topic – identify and present the key issues.
2. The talk – group or individual.
3. The purpose of the talk and the intended audience.
4. The length of time you have to talk.
5. The length of time for questions.
6. The method of presentation, e.g. overhead projector, via a computer, with no visual aids at all.
7. The handouts—are you expected to provide them; if so, how many?
8. The room layout: where will you stand, where can you put your papers? If you are a group, how will you arrange yourselves in the space?
9. The running order for presentations – are you one of many that afternoon?
10. The rehearsal – use to decide who says what in a group talk.
11. The assessment criteria – address them in the preparation.

1. Organizing what to include

The amount of detail you put into your talk will be determined by the purpose and the audience, but your talk must always have a **beginning**, a **middle** and an **end**.

If you are presenting an individual or group project you need to:

- contextualize the project – lead-in
- state how you carried out the project
- mention problems you may have experienced

- state your findings and conclusions.

If you are presenting an idea you need to:

- contextualize the issues
- state where you researched the issues (a broad-brush approach to show where you have your evidence)
- discuss controversial issues
- state any conclusions.

NOTE: A common mistake with many student presentations is that the talk fails to have a proper introduction that contextualizes and introduces the audience to the topic. Many students jump straight into the fine detail of their work. **Do not do this**, as the audience has to work hard to ‘catch up’ in order to understand you. You have to assume that your audience may not know as much about the topic as you and providing an introduction is a key element in a talk.

2. Timing

Check how long you have for your ‘slot’ and confirm if this includes question and feedback time afterwards. As a rule of thumb, work on the following for a 15-minute slot:

- 10 minutes talking
- 5 minutes questions and/or feedback.

Again, if you assume one slide per minute then you should have a **maximum** of 10 slides for a 10-minute talk.

3. The method of presentation

The most common ways of giving a presentation are as follows:

- via a computer using presentation software
- using an overhead projector (OHP)
- with no visual aids at all.

When using an **overhead projector** you will need transparent slides either to write on, with a marker pen, or to print to from your computer. You can use a presentation package, like Microsoft PowerPoint, and print directly onto OHP slides. It is not recommended that slides are handwritten as this can appear messy, unless you have particularly clear handwriting. Graphics would also have to be hand drawn and that is not a good idea.

When using a piece of software you can **present via your computer**. This gives a clearer presentation and enables you to add graphics easily, include color and use hyperlinks if necessary. If part of your work was to produce a website, then this would be vital, as you would be able to show it.

Giving a talk with **no visual aids** is quite difficult. The traditional example of this is reading a paper in a tutorial. This can be very tedious. If you were expected to use this mode of delivery, it would be wise to put your key ideas on cards and talk around the ideas, rather than reading directly from your paper.

4. Slide design

The design of your slides is important. Your audience will not want to read a lot of text from your slides. You are not there to read from

Presenting your work

Your slides are there as visual aids to set the scene for the topic you are talking

about and give a visual anchor around which you can talk. Therefore, the more visual you can make your slides, the better – as long as they don't look like a comic! We all remember:

- images
- diagrams that show connections/processes
- key words and phrases (especially if they are repeated often enough).

We do not remember dense text or bullet points very well.

Software packages like PowerPoint have built-in slide designs, but there are only a few that are really usable and not too fussy. We have all seen those designs too often and this can create boredom in the audience before you start. So, avoid the template designs in the software and create your own, if you can.

Try using more images than text, but make sure your images are related to your work.

Your slides should be clear and uncluttered in order to be understood. Select a font that is easy to read, and be guided by the suggested font sizes in PowerPoint (point size 32 for main bullets and 28 for sub-bullets).

5. What audiences remember

Your audiences will only hear what you have to say once; they have no opportunity to go back and check. What you say at each point should be clear. We all remember how things 'fit together' better than a list of things. If you can show how things are connected (via diagrams), how processes work (flow diagrams) and how things look (images, pictures) then this will make your presentation memorable. Identify your 'take home message' and make sure you say this at the end in a clear voice with visual support.

6. Dealing with nerves

Many people get nervous when they have to speak in front of others, even if they have been presenting for years. You may think your lecturers are fine at giving talks, but invariably the first few lectures of a semester cause a few ‘butterflies’, even to long-standing performers. Having some nerves is good as this gets the adrenaline flowing and keeps you alert and on top of the subject. You may find that you are nervous at the beginning of the talk, until you get into the swing of it, and then you are fine. This is very common. Problems only occur when your performance nerves overtake you.

Some of the things you may be nervous about are:

- an overwhelming feeling of being watched
- feeling that others will think you’re stupid
- forgetting what you want to say
- losing your thread and getting muddled.

Some of the signs that tell you that you’re nervous are:

- shaking
- forgetting certain words
- stuttering
- sweating
- your voice becomes higher than normal
- you speak too quickly
- being tongue-tied.

You may be able to recognize some of these characteristics when you give a talk, and the effect can be distressing.

Dealing with performance nerves

The first thing you need to do is take back control, and you do this by increasing your confidence in your own ability by being well prepared and in control of the topic you are presenting. Rehearse your talk so that you practice the words and phrases you are going to use and assess how long your talk will last so that it is within your time limit. Most student project presentations are approximately 15–20 minutes, but if you are presenting as part of a group you may only have 5 minutes for your part. Never go over your time limit. When you rehearse, you should identify areas that don't flow, where you are unsure of the point, or where you've included something that you are now unhappy with. A rehearsal will also identify the key sentences you need to link between slides.

The next thing you need to do is deal with your emotions. As stated before, some nerves are good, but not too many. Your aim is to calm yourself down so that you can think and speak clearly. Try visualizing a speaker you admire. Identify why you admire that speaker and try to visualize yourself presenting like him or her. You need to do this regularly so that it becomes a habit and when you stand up, there you are 'in character'. If that does not work for you, deep breathing is often recommended in order to lower your heart rate and reduce your nerves. Finally, reflect honestly with a friend on your performance. You may feel, for example, that you were hesitating a lot, but more than likely the audience didn't notice it. Your perceptions of your performance are therefore often different from the audience's. Essentially, you have to find out what works for you, and it is important to be proactive in achieving that.

7. Delivering your talk confidently

First, remind yourself that giving a talk is not the same as writing an essay that you then read out. Reading aloud from a script will result in poor marks for the 'communication skills' aspect of your assessment (see feedback for Activity 1). So, writing an essay or long-hand notes, and then reading them, is not an option! What you will need is some form of notes – perhaps 'prompt cards', unless you are confident

enough to rely on PowerPoint slides or transparencies to act as prompts for you.

When written text is read aloud it always sounds monotonous, and it is easier to read it than to listen to it! Free speech is much more interesting, and it does not matter about the odd 'um' or 'er' – that's natural and allows some 'processing time' for your audience.

The key features that you need to consider during the delivery of a talk are your:

- voice and pace – vocal formatting
- engagement with the audience
- manner of handling of questions.

7.1. Voice and pace

Voice and pace can be summarized in Volume, pitch, tone, speed.

Volume: Project your voice to back of room

Don't tail off at the end of a sentence – important information is there

Speak louder on key points to emphasize

Notice if people are straining to hear you and adjust your volume

Pitch: Higher pitch when nervous

Relax and lower your pitch

Lower your pitch to end a point

Lower pitch at end of slide

Raise your pitch to start a new point

Raise pitch to start new point on new slide

Tone: Monotonous tone sends audience to sleep

Engaged tone – pitch, volume and speed variations keep audience alert

Don't read from a text – it becomes monotonous

Speed: Not too fast or too slow Check audience is with you

A pause lets the audience think – use for emphasis

A pause shows separation between ideas

Pause between slides.

NOTE: Use language markers, e.g. and now ... the next point ... in contrast ... in conclusion ... and finally ... plus voice tone to indicate a change or a new point. This can be done by raising your voice, speaking more slowly and pausing slightly before moving on; this helps the audience to follow the flow of your talk.

7.2. Engagement with the audience

For those of you in the process of developing your oral presentation skills, you can tend to focus on yourself as the speaker and forget about the audience. This is a cardinal mistake. Once you accept that the audience is there and you want to engage with them, then your talk will become an interactive event and you will enjoy it. To engage your audience therefore you should:

- stand for eight seconds at the beginning of your talk looking at the audience – just scan across the room and do not look at anyone in particular, which cues the audience that you are ready to speak
- introduce yourself while scanning the audience
- start positively and not with an apology because something did not work – your audience is only interested in what you have to say now
- look and sound interested in your talk and the audience
- tell your audience the structure of your talk
- maintain the right pace and use voice features mentioned above
- thank the audience for listening and invite questions.

NOTE If you read from a paper you will not be able to engage with the audience as you will lose eye contact, start to mumble into your paper, be monotonous and read too fast. If you find that slides are not enough and you feel quite nervous, use notes on a card, or a paper with large print – around (Verdana point size 16). Add notes to tell yourself to look at the audience, pause or stress a point.

7.3. Handling questions

This is always harder for the individual presenter. However, you need to prepare as well as you can for questions. Make a list of your key messages and look at the questions that could be asked for each. If you are in a group, you should answer questions relating to your contribution to the talk. Question areas to prepare for include the following:

- Why did you choose to research the topic using a particular method?
- Did the work of a key author influence you in any way?
- How did you arrive at your conclusions (possibly the choice of statistics used)?
What difficulties did you find during your research and how did you overcome them?
- If you did this work again, what changes would you make?

NOTE If you get questions you can not answer, be honest. It is always obvious when a speaker tries to invent an answer. You can always thank the questioner for that question, as it will move your thinking on.