

Oral presentations

Many students find oral presentations a particularly challenging and nerve-wracking form of assessment. It is, however, important to develop your skills and confidence in giving such presentations because you will have to do so, both during some interviews and in many work situations.

There are four simple steps to a good oral presentation:

1. PLAN
2. PREPARE
3. PRACTISE
4. PRESENT

PLAN

- analyse your audience
 - what is their level of expertise in your subject – this will affect the terminology and language you use, and the amount of information you cover. If they are new to the subject, they will absorb less.
 - what do they want to know? Why are they listening to you?
 - what aspects of the subject will interest them the most?
 - How will you involve them in your presentation?
- What is the purpose of your presentation?
 - Is your goal to
 - entertain your audience
 - inform your audience
 - convince your audience of a particular point-of-view
 - inspire your audience to think about the topic
 - What is your main point? Can you express it in a single sentence?
- Select effective supporting information
 - Do your research but don't overdo it – remember you have a limited time and your audience can only absorb so much information
 - Choose evidence which will support the purpose of your presentation
 - explanation
 - statistical evidence
 - interesting examples
 - anecdotes
 - comparisons
 - select or create the visual aids you will use to make your presentation interesting and lively, and which will involve your audience as much as possible

- whiteboard drawing – if you use a whiteboard, put the information up before you start. You may, for example, want to write up an outline of your talk, so your audience will know where you are and what is to come. If you use it during your talk, you will have to turn your back to the audience, which is not a good idea. Writing on the board is also time-consuming and can break the thread of your presentation.
- overhead transparencies – these are easy and reliable but perhaps rather dated now. Make sure they are easily readable and that you have only a few points on each overhead
- PowerPoint – computerised overheads! These look very professional and you can use lots of fancy graphics but don't let your slides get cluttered. Also, technology can fail, so have printed handouts as a back-up.
- flip-charts – overheads or slides in card form, made into a large book bound at the top in a way which allows each card to be flipped over as required
- posters, photographs, slides, models or 3D objects, and video clips – always add lots of interest to a presentation. Remember that video clips will use up quite a bit of time though
- audience participation can be encouraged with role plays, question and answer sessions, and worksheets. Always encourage questions during the presentation – this gives you feedback on how it is going and what interests the audience
- handouts – always useful, especially when technology fails! It is a good idea to give out a list of your references, which your audience can then look up later, and perhaps some follow-up questions for discussion

PREPARE

- Prepare an outline from the information you have gathered
- Organise your material into a 3-part structure
 - Introduction – (which can be written last) – you want your audience to be interested, to know what your main point is and how you are going
 - begin with a question, a funny story, a startling comment, or something to make your audience think – anything which will capture attention and arouse interest in the topic
 - state your purpose – “I am going to talk about...”; “Today I want to explain...”.
 - provide necessary context – background, definitions etc.
 - present an outline of your talk – list the points you will make – eg “First of all...Then...This will lead to...Finally...”.
 - Body
 - present your main points one by one in logical order

- don't overload your audience with information – stick to 4-5 main points
- pause at the end of each main point so your audience can take notes or think about what you are saying
- make it clear that you are moving on to another point eg “The next issue I want to discuss is...”; Now I'd like to explain...”.
- Use clear examples to illustrate your points
- Use your visual aids / audience activities to further support your points and make the presentation more interesting
- Conclusion
 - it is very important to leave your audience with a clear summary of everything you have covered
 - summarise the main points again in a clear, succinct manner: “To sum up,...”; “To recap the main points...”.
 - Restate the purpose of your talk, and say that you have achieved your aim: “My intention was... and it should be clear that...”; “I think you can now see that...”.
 - End confidently; thank your audience and invite questions. Have one or two provocative questions or discussion points ready to set the ball rolling if necessary

PRACTISE

- practise, practise, practise! – that's the secret of controlling nervousness
 - practise aloud – it doesn't work just to say it in your head
 - check the timing and adjust the length of the talk accordingly
 - make sure you have your visuals in the right order and practise using them in conjunction with your spoken text
 - check out the equipment you will use and make sure it is working and that you are completely familiar with how it works
- expect the unexpected
 - think about how you will answer questions from the audience, both during your talk and afterwards
 - what will you do if you don't know the answer – perhaps ask if anyone in the audience knows? Or offer to find out and get back to the questioner
 - how will you respond to criticism – try not to see criticism as a personal attack but as a collaborative search for better knowledge and accuracy
 - what if the audience misunderstands you? Think about how you could explain your points differently if necessary

PRESENT

- **talk** to the audience, don't read to them – reading from your notes or visual aids is the worst mistake you can make

- use your PowerPoint / flip-chart / overheads only as prompts; elaborate orally on the points they make
- maintain eye contact with your audience
- speak loudly enough for everyone to hear
- speak slowly and clearly. The most common mistake in public speaking is rushing through the material at top speed. So keep the mantra, “Slow down”, in your head all the time
- use pauses – breathe between points and give your audience time to think about what you have said or to make notes. Deep breaths also help control nervousness
- make sure you know how to pronounce all the words in your talk – take special care over unusual, difficult or foreign words and any technical words
- vary your voice quality – change the pitch and volume to keep your audience awake! Use stress to emphasise the main points
- Be expressive and convey your information as interestingly and succinctly as possible - audience attention span tends to be brief
- remember body language is important
 - walk purposefully and confidently to the front of the room
 - stand straight, hold your head up, look your audience in the eye
 - use appropriate hand and facial gestures but avoid distracting mannerisms – fiddling, slouching, scratching etc.
- nervousness is normal. Combat it by
 - being well prepared and fully in control of your material
 - practising until you are completely confident about what you will say and the use of your visual aids
 - smiling and treating your audience as friends
 - remember: an oral presentation is a performance – you have to be like an actor. Almost everyone feels nervous before speaking publicly – the trick is to avoid communicating your nerves. If you act confidently and seem to be enjoying yourself, your audience will respond positively – and you will feel better too!

Adapted from:

Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology. Oral presentation skills. Retrieved from http://library.cpit.ac.nz/learning_services/learning_and_study_resources/oral_presentation_skills, 4 June 2013.

Monash University. A guide to oral presentation skills. Retrieved from <http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/quickrefs/11-oral-presentations.xml>, 31 May 2013.

University of Canberra. Academic Skills Centre. Giving an oral presentation. Retrieved from <http://www.canberra.edu.au/studyskills/learning/oral>, 31 May 2013.

Further reading (available at TPP Library)

Brown, M. (2008). *Speaking easy: how to speak to audiences with confidence and authority*. 3rd ed. Oxford, N.Z.: Media Associates.

Grant-Williams, R. (2002). *Voice power: using your voice to captivate, persuade and command attention*. New York: Amacom.

Guidelines for speaking in public, in *How to write and speak better*. (2010). 2nd ed. Surry Hills, N.S.W.: Reader's Digest, p. 300-317.

Guilfoyle, D. (2002). *Charisma effect: how to captivate an audience and deliver a winning message*. Australia: McGraw-Hill.

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