

7

Giving Presentations

One of the things you will often be asked to do at the university is to give a presentation in class. Many people are terrified of public speaking and would do anything to get out of it. Nevertheless, as good athletes and actors know, you need to be a little nervous so that your body produces the adrenaline to help you give a good performance.

The essential thing is to control your nerves instead of allowing them to control you. Even if you are not nervous, you need to be aware that there is more to giving a good presentation than simply standing up and talking. Above all, a good presentation meets the needs of the audience and is easy for them to listen to, follow and understand and it takes time and effort to prepare such a presentation.

This chapter suggests simple ways to make your presentation an effective one. You need to:

- Prepare well
- Deliver confidently
- Answer questions competently

7.1 Prepare Well

Much of the success of a presentation depends on good preparation. Only if you have prepared thoroughly can you reduce your nerves and ensure that what you say will both fulfil your own objective and be relevant to your audience. You should be prepared to spend a lot of time on preparation.



7.1.1 *Define your purpose*

It is essential to know what you are trying to do before you begin.

In general terms, most classroom presentations will be to inform or to persuade, although these are not mutually exclusive. In reality there will always be an element of persuasion as you want the audience to believe and accept what you are saying.

To define a more specific objective for yourself, write one sentence stating what you want the audience to know or think at the end of your presentation, e.g. *I want the audience to understand the causes of global warming* or *I want the audience to be persuaded that they can do something about global warming* or a combination of both.

7.1.2 *Analyse your audience*

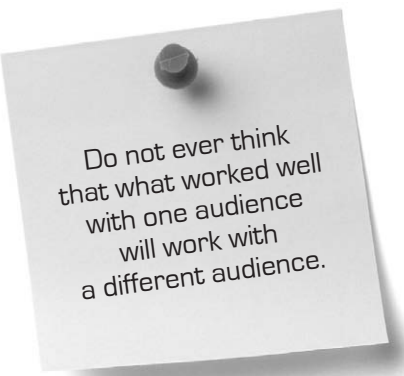
Do not ever think that what worked well with one audience will work with a different audience. Different audiences need different presentations. You must get to know as much about your audience as you can. Think about the size of the audience with regard to the style of the presentation; if you do not know already, find out who will be in it, then consider how much they know about your topic and what their particular interests, concerns and possible objections will be so you can target your content to them.

7.1.3 *Consider logistics*

Make sure you know where, when and how long your presentation will be. Check the equipment in the room where you will present and make sure it is compatible with what you have prepared and that you know how to use it.

7.1.4 *Research your topic*

Finding out as much as you can about your topic will give you confidence, especially for answering questions more competently. However, be aware that you will have to be selective, including only the information that best helps you to achieve your objective and meet the needs of the audience.



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7.1.5 Organise your material

Listening for information is difficult as the audience has to grasp what you say immediately. Thus you must help them with clear, logical organisation and by giving clear transition statements between points.

7.1.5.1 Body

Most people prepare this section first. This is where you develop your argument. Be careful to:

- make sure you have only 3 or 4 main points — the audience cannot absorb more.
- consider your objective and the needs of your audience when selecting which points to include.
- support each main point well. You cannot simply make claims. Include concrete *evidence* such as examples, statistics and analogies to persuade your audience to believe you.
- check that the ideas are arranged logically.
- plan your use of connectives. These are extremely important to help the audience follow the presentation. Presenters tend to get very absorbed in content and forget connectives — make sure you have lots of them to show the relationships between ideas, e.g. *First, Second..., Another reason is..., On the other hand....* Use heavier transitions when you move between main points, e.g. *So now we have seen the major causes of global warming, let's have a look at what each of us can do to combat it.*

7.1.5.2 Introduction

First impressions are important. In your introduction you should:

- get the audience's attention, e.g. you could ask a question, arouse curiosity or state some surprising information.
- state your topic clearly.
- give a preview so the audience has a structure to help them follow the presentation.

7.1.5.3 Conclusion

The conclusion is your last chance to get your message across. You should:

- signal that the end is coming — the audience should never be surprised by the ending. Do not say, *That's the end of my presentation...* but something like *To conclude...* or *As we can see...*
- reinforce your central idea, e.g. you can summarise the main points, make a prediction or refer to points made in your introduction.

7.1.6 Prepare your outline

An outline gives you a visual impression of the structure of the talk and helps you check that the organisation is logical and the content complete.

7.1.7 *Plan what to say*

Some people like to write a script but you should **not** present from this — reduce it to delivery notes later. You should also **never memorise** a presentation as it will not sound natural and your eyes will glaze over as you try to recall your points. Worse still, you might forget it. As you prepare what to say, remember to:

- include transitions to show the relationship between ideas very clearly.
- use an appropriate tone — use the language of speech, not writing, and make sure it sounds like you.

The best way to present is using good outline/delivery notes which you have thought about carefully and **rehearsed many times**.

7.1.8 *Prepare your visual aids*

Do not consider visuals until you are clear about your objective, know your material very well and have done an outline to check the structure is clear. Then decide if and where you will use visual aids. You do not have to use visuals for every presentation. Only use them if they really help you to explain a difficult concept and help the audience to understand you better. PowerPoint is widely used nowadays and often badly used.

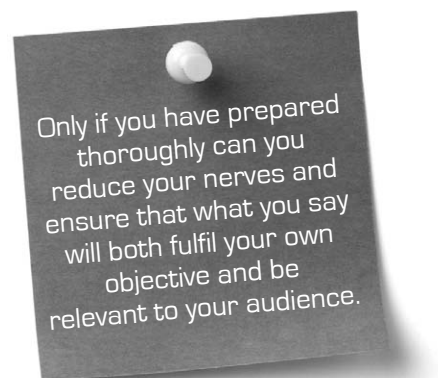
When designing PowerPoint slides you should:

- use an uncluttered background.
- use the same layout for each slide, i.e. have all elements at the same level, e.g. main headings and sub headings in the same font, size, and colour to help the audience follow the structure.
- limit the number of colours and use high contrast colours — always check your colours and contrast on the projector as the effect is often duller than on a computer.
- put key points in bullets — do not use your slides as a script. At no time should you be reading from a slide; there should be no complete sentences on a slide.
- have no more than 7 lines per slide, 7 words per line.
- use animation only to help the audience follow the presentation — keep it as simple as possible. Your objective should be clarity not creativity.
- use a blank screen if you are talking about something for which you have no slide.

7.1.9 *Rehearse*

Never omit this step. You should rehearse many times, standing up, visualising the audience in front of you and using your visual aids. Rehearsing helps you:

- build self confidence.
- develop familiarity with your material so you do not have to look at your notes too often.
- practise using equipment and integrating visuals into the talk.
- check that the length fits your time limit.



7.2 *Deliver Confidently*

Good preparation should take care of the verbal part of your presentation but it is your non-verbal communication that is critical to make you appear confident, competent and credible, or otherwise. Pay attention to these aspects as you rehearse and present.

7.2.1 *Maintain eye contact*

This is perhaps **the most important aspect** of non-verbal communication. You must establish eye contact with the audience to show you are interested in them, confident and trustworthy. In a small group give everyone a few seconds' eye contact regularly. Do not focus on any one person or section of the audience and make sure it is **real** eye contact, not simply a glazed gaze above the audience's heads.

7.2.2 *Have a confident posture*

Look alert, confident and energetic but not frozen. Stand upright, firmly on both feet but move when necessary and to add some action, e.g. to point to a visual aid or to highlight the shift to a new point. If you are using PowerPoint, you can move away from the computer, closer to the audience to talk about the slide you are showing and then back to change slides. Do not, however, pace around, fidget or sway from side to side.

7.2.3 *Use gestures*

Well timed and not too frequent gestures can support what you say and add life to your presentation. Use natural gestures such as counting on your fingers or demonstrating size with your hands. Make sure the gestures are not distracting, e.g. do not wave your hands — or your notes — around or point at the audience.

7.2.4 *Have natural facial expressions*

Your facial expressions communicate a lot. Try to relax and vary your expression according to the seriousness of the information you are presenting. If you are really looking at and interacting with the audience, this should happen naturally.

7.2.5 *Vary your voice*

Obviously you need to speak loudly enough for everyone to hear but you should also pay attention to sounding interesting; vary your volume for emphasis and your pitch to sound expressive and enthusiastic. Nothing sends the audience to sleep faster than a presentation delivered in a monotone.

7.2.6 *Control your speed*

When people are nervous they tend to speak too fast.

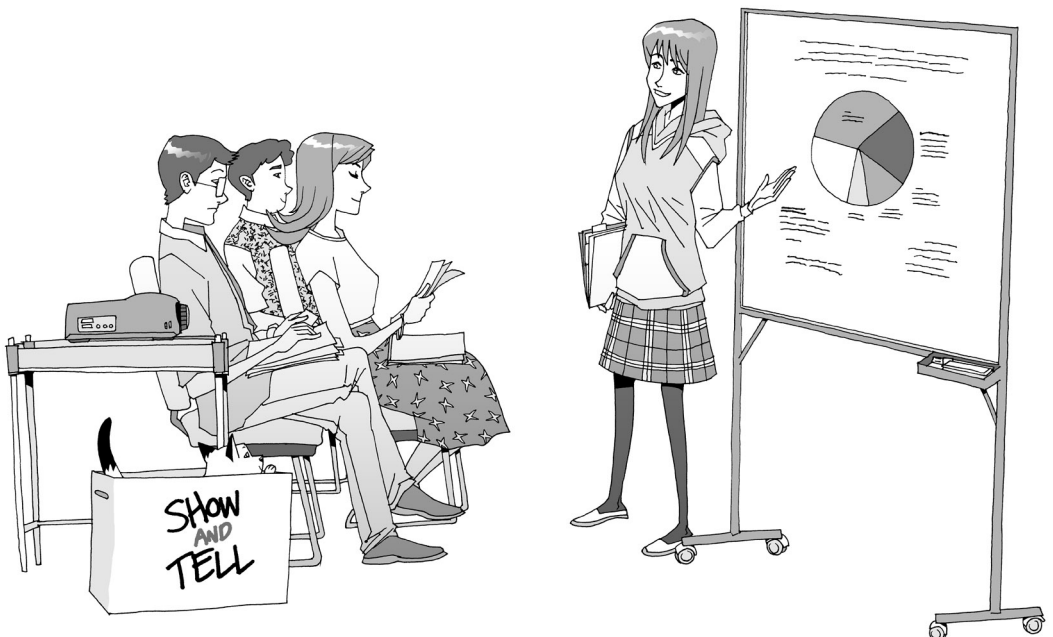
Remember how difficult it is for people to listen to and understand you and do not rush through your points. You can slow down to emphasise key points and use pauses to indicate a change of subject.

7.2.7 *Handle visual aids properly*

The audience should focus on you, not the visual aids, so talk to them, not to the screen. Do not forget you must maintain eye contact so your shoulders should face the audience at all times. Also, make sure to integrate visuals properly — only reveal one when you are talking about it and remove it immediately when you finish discussing it. You should never be talking about something different from what you are showing on screen. You can use a blank screen if you are talking about something for which you have no visual.

7.3 *Answer Questions Competently*

If you have prepared well, you will know a lot about the topic so questions will not scare you. Sometimes people ask a question because they have not heard what you said so you just have to repeat your point but sometimes they have not understood so you have to explain, perhaps by elaborating more. Always stay calm and make sure you have heard — and understood — the entire question. Respond honestly as best you can and check the clarity of your response before moving on.



Conclusion

You will have to do many presentations during your time in the university. Always prepare well so that you really know your audience and their needs and you are clear about your objective. Your content should be well organised, with clear relationships between points, and should help you to achieve that objective. Always rehearse standing up and visualising the audience in front of you. In this way, you should be able to overcome your nerves, if you are frightened of public speaking or to produce a very polished presentation, if you are a confident speaker.

Further reading

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- Tan, W. (2000). PowerPointitis: The disease & its cure. *CDTLink Vol. 4 No. 3*. Retrieved on May 24, 2009 from <http://www.cdtl.nus.edu.sg/link/nov2000/tech2.htm>

Chapter contributed by Catherine COOK

