

PRESENTATION SKILLS

This advice sheet will help you to deliver a presentation with confidence, by looking at what should be considered **before, during, and after** a talk.

Before a presentation

The success of a good presentation lies in the preparation. Take time to think about:

- The audience – who are they, how many and what do they already know?
- The occasion – is it formal or informal? A lecture, a debate, a speech?
- The point – what is the purpose of the talk?
- The environment – what is the size and layout of the room, and what facilities will be available (projector, flip chart)?

Once this has been considered, it's time to **gather, select and structure** your material.

Gathering

There are many sources of information available to you. Make sure you assess the authority (who wrote it?), currency (how up-to-date is it?) and accuracy of a source before you rely on it to support a point in your presentation.

Selecting

Often when you are asked to give a talk you will need to distil a large amount of information into a short time period. You need to be ruthless in the way that you prioritise information.

Too much information can confuse an audience.

- What is centrally relevant?
- What can be left out?
- What is supporting information?
- Will handouts help?

Structuring

A clear structure to your presentation will not only provide you with a clear path to follow, but also help your audience. Think about:

- What are your main points?
- In what order do they need to be discussed?
- What secondary information should come under each of your headings?

Either side of your main argument, remember to write:

- **An introduction:** This should welcome your audience, introduce the key themes of your presentation, and the order in which you will present them. This will create a map in the minds of the audience.
- **A conclusion:** This should summarise the main points of your presentation and perhaps introduce a final point or question to linger in the minds of your audience.

Managing your props: notes, visual aids, and handouts

Notes

You'll need to think about how you are going to deliver your presentation. Some people memorise the whole talk, others read the entire thing from their notes. A middle ground is probably the best way. Familiarise yourself with your material to the point that you will only need structured notes to guide you. This saves you from forgetting what you have memorised, or losing your place in reams of text.

Visual aids

Visual aids such as slides or posters are helpful both to you as the speaker, and to your audience. They can help illustrate your points and avert the audience's gaze, which helps if you're nervous. They also help to retain the audience's interest, giving them another means by which they can understand the point you are making. Whatever you use, ensure it is visible to all, legible, and remember to remove it when you've finished with it to avoid distraction.

Handouts

Providing handouts is another good way of reinforcing your message and providing supplementary material that there may not be time to present.

Managing nerves

Nervousness is probably the biggest problem that most inexperienced speakers face. Actually, it's good to feel a bit nervous, as this provides the adrenalin rush we need to give a good performance. However, excessive nerves can have the opposite effect and no-one enjoys the physical or emotional symptoms of fear. So how can nerves be managed?

- **Practice, practice, practice** - Rehearse in front of the mirror, or with friends. Feeling prepared goes a long way to alleviating your nerves.
- **Name your fears** - Write down exactly what it is you're afraid of, then you can devise strategies to cope.
- **What is the worst case scenario?** - Even if the talk fails miserably, you will not die! Thinking of the worst case scenario often puts things back in perspective.
- **Relaxation techniques**- Regular deep breathing gives your body the oxygen it needs to burn off excess adrenalin, thus calming you down. A walk should have the same effect.

"If you are over-nervous, it does not mean you cannot be a successful speaker, it merely means you have more work to do".

Turk, C. (1985) Effective Speaking: communicating in speech. London: Spon p.112.

During a presentation

When the day finally arrives and your turn has come, don't be in a rush to start and 'get it over and done with'. Take your time to prepare, ensure that your notes are in order, your visual aids are in place and that the environment is as you want it, to give you confidence

during the presentation. Give some thought to **your audience, your voice, your body language and the time.**

Your audience

Remembering that the audience are a group of real people, who are on your side (not the enemy), and with a genuine interest in what you have to say, goes a long way to helping you communicate with them effectively. It also helps alleviate nerves.

“If I were asked which was the main advice I would give a novice speaker, I would choose these three:

- 1. Trust and like the audience, do not fear and confront them*
- 2. Look at them*
- 3. Smile*

The second and third of these are, of course, the ways in which the first is expressed.”

Turk, C. (1985) *Effective Speaking: communicating in speech.* London: Spon p.39.

Your voice

There are estimates that the words we use count for only 7% of the message we communicate. Our tone of voice makes up 38%. When thinking about our voices we need to ensure they are:

- **Audible** - some rooms have better acoustics than others, but nerves can cause our volume to decrease. Keep your head up and speak slowly and clearly, aiming at the person at the back of the room.
- **Interesting** – concentration spans are short so retain interest by varying the tone of your voice. Asking a question naturally causes this to happen.
- **Appropriately paced** – Research has shown that we don't speak more quickly during presentations, but the number of natural pauses in our speech decreases. It may feel artificial, but insert enough pauses in your talk to allow the audience to take in all the information. One trick is to add a couple of extra seconds of silence as you change slides.

Your body language

Non-verbal communication speaks more than our words and voices combined. When presenting remember:

- **Eye contact.** - Keep in contact with your audience: look at them and try to make eye contact. If the group is spread out make sure you look around the room to involve everyone. If you are too nervous to make eye contact, try focusing on people's foreheads or just past them – this gives the impression you're making eye contact!
- **Don't fidget** - It is hard to listen to the content of a talk if the speaker is pacing up and down or fiddling with her glasses.
- **Pay attention to fellow presenters**- if you are presenting with someone else don't fidget or stare out of the window during their part of the presentation!

The time

It is important that you keep to time – especially in an academic setting where marks may be deducted if you talk for longer than allocated. Before you start, make yourself a note of the time you need to finish by, keep an eye on the clock and if you run out of time, stop. Audiences welcome talks that finish on time – or a bit before.

Signposting

At the start and throughout the course of your presentation, it is important to signal to your audience where you are currently in terms of structure and where you are going next. In other words, guide them through your presentation 'journey'. For example, at the beginning, you might tell them that you will start with x, then you'll move on to y and finally you will sum it all up. When moving from one point to the next, you might add, "That's all I want to say about.... now I'll say a few words about...."

After a presentation

Once the talk is over, the audience may have some questions. When handling questions remember to:

- **Appear interested** - Give your questioner your full attention and put them at ease if they appear nervous.
- **Summarise the question** - Rephrasing the question not only gives you time to think, and confirms with the questioner that you have understood, but also ensures that the rest of the audience have heard it.
- **Answer the question set** - The temptation, if you don't know the answer, is to talk about something else. Try and stick to the topic and if you don't know, offer to take their details and find out for them.
- **Don't talk too long** - The time for questions is always limited and there may be other questioners waiting for their turn. Try and keep your answers succinct and to the point.

Further reading

Van Emden, J. and Becker, L.M. (2010) *Presentation skills for students*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (Also available online via the Library Catalogue)

All study advice sheets are available to view and download on the Library website:

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