

Study Skills Series

How to plan and deliver an oral presentation

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Making an impact—delivering effective presentations

Even the thought of delivering oral presentations tends to instill a feeling of anxiety and dread in most people. The fear of becoming tongue-tied, developing a dry mouth, and feeling a fool are enough to prevent even the most enthusiastic person from sharing their ideas in the public arena. You will be pleased to know that these emotions are perfectly normal and with careful preparation and planning they can be kept under control. As with most things it is all in the preparation. This leaflet will give you some key tips on:

- how to plan, prepare and structure your material,
- how to control those pre-performance nerves.
- how to deliver the presentation with flair!

Where to start.....

There are many reasons for delivering an oral presentation. It could be part of an assessment, it may be for a job interview or even to present ideas at a conference. Whatever the reason for the presentation there are some fundamental principles which apply to all types of presentation.

Planning the presentation:

Before you start putting the presentation together you need to find out the following:

1. Who will be in the audience and their current level of knowledge?
2. How many people will be there, will they expect some audience participation?
3. What will the audience want to know?
4. What key messages do you want to convey?
5. What media are available to support your presentation ie PowerPoint™, video?
6. Are there other topics being presented, is there a danger of overlap?
7. When are you presenting and what length of time has been allocated for you to complete the presentation? Does this include questions?

Preparing and structuring your presentation

Content—what to include?

When you are passionate about a topic it is very easy to want to present everything you know. However there is only a certain amount you will be able to convey to the audience due to time limits and the amount of information individuals can realistically absorb in a given time frame. The rule is generally not to include any more than 5 key points. You can generate ideas for your presentation in much the same way as you would when writing an assignment; please refer to the guidelines on essay writing for further information.

Having identified the key points you want to present you now need to consider how you will use images, graphs, statistics and other information to support these points and to maximize their impact on the audience.

The types of material you use will depend on whether:

- You want to inject humour
- You want to persuade the audience
- You are trying to explain a complex subject
- You want to shock them into taking notice

Structuring your presentation.

An oral presentation needs an introduction, main body and conclusion.

The introduction should:

- Grab the audience's attention
- Provide an overview of who the speaker is and their background
- Identify the key objectives or purpose of the presentation ie what will be covered by the speaker.

The main body should be organized in such a way that the key points are presented in a logical order. When moving on from one key point to another try to recap on what has been covered and make it clear that you will be moving on to a new point of discussion. Ensure that the points you are making are well argued and supported with evidence. Anecdotes are also useful to make the presentation 'come alive'. In addition, linking the content of the presentation to the audience's own context, maintains attention and keeps the presentation relevant.

The conclusion should provide a summary of the key points raised, identify any course of action that is needed, provide an opportunity to ask questions and end with something that will have lasting impact.

Visual aids

Visual aids are used to help convey the message more clearly when delivering an oral presentation. A picture, diagram or graph can help the audience make sense of complex information and enable them to commit it to memory. Many presenters use PowerPoint™ to produce slides to support the content of their presentation. There are courses offered by the Institute in the use of PowerPoint™ Please speak to the Institute staff for more information. However it is important to remember that 'less is more' and to avoid the following cardinal errors when designing slides:

- Too much animation
- Slide is too cluttered
- Including graphs or tables that are difficult to read

Pre-performance preparation:

1. Rehearse your presentation
2. Ask friends/colleagues to give you feedback
3. Practice using your visual aids, check that you don't have too many and that they are visually pleasing
4. Save your presentation in two different formats
5. Decide whether you will use notes as prompts these can take the form of;
 - A script
 - Note cards
 - PowerPoint™ slides

Managing nerves:

Never easy, you may already have a coping strategy, however deep breathing, speaking slowly and being well prepared are some ways of reducing your anxiety. Some people use humour to help them engage with their audience, others focus on individuals who are showing an interest in what they are saying. Water and chewing gum can help a dry mouth!

Delivering the presentation:

Voice

Make sure you vary your tone, adjust the volume and rate so that you can be heard and understood.

Rapport

Connect with the audience through the use of eye contact and appropriate humour. Possibly include information that relates to the audience's specific situation. Invite questions from the audience either during or at the end of the presentation.

Managing notes and visual aids

Try and avoid reading your notes; reading out a script is not the most effective way of maintaining interest. Make sure your notes are in the right order, the same for your slides and other visual aids. Check that you are not obstructing the projector screen. Unless handouts are to be used for note-taking they are best left to the end of the presentation as they can be distracting.

Evaluate your performance:

When you have overcome the adrenaline rush—give some thought as to what went well and what you would do differently. Use your reflections and any feedback from the audience to learn from the experience.