

Making oral presentations

Oral presentation skills

This advice sheet will help you to plan and deliver an oral presentation. Presentation skills are straightforward and the following information will introduce you to a number of specific ways of helping you to deliver effective presentations.

Action planning

A simple planning strategy is:
Think – Structure - Write - Check

Keep these four stages distinct and plan your time around them.

Think

These factors should be considered in your planning:

- Guidelines
- Context
- Subject
- **Guidelines - working to a brief**

Have you been set a time limit?

Have you been given a specific question to answer or remit to cover?

How will the work be assessed?

- By your tutor?
- By other students?
- By yourself?

What are the assessment criteria? - What makes a good presentation?

All of these questions will determine the design of your presentation. If any aspects of the guidelines are unclear you will need to ask for clarification.

Context - identifying your audience

To whom will you be presenting?

- To other students?
- To an assessment panel?

Are all the people in the room at the same level of understanding?

Have they come from different subject backgrounds?

Other contextual issues include the environment:

- Will it be a large lecture theatre or a smaller seminar room?
- Where will the audience be sitting?

Contents

| | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| Oral presentation skills | >>1 |
| Action planning | >>1 |
| Think | >>1 |
| Structure | >>2 |
| Write | >>2 |
| Check | >>2 |
| Injecting life | >>3 |
| Practice... | >>3 |
| Reading from notes | >>3 |
| Speaking to others | >>4 |
| Eye contact – tip | >>4 |

- **Subject - Getting the information right**

Often when you are asked to give a talk you will need to distil a large amount of information into a brief period.

You need to be ruthless in the way that you prioritise information. This will help you keep your presentation tightly focused. Too much information can confuse an audience.

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

You should also consider the most effective ways of delivering information. Detailed information or references may be best given out on a sheet of paper to support your talk. Indeed, it can be a very powerful tool to link a section of your presentation with some written information. If used correctly, handouts can help focus your audience's mind, help them take notes and ask questions.

Structure

A clear structure to your presentation will not only provide you with a clear path to follow but also guide your audience. Audio-visual aids using an overhead projector or flip-chart can highlight key information but make sure they will be visible to all the audience.

When planning your presentation ask yourself the following questions:

- What are the main points?
- What order do they need to be discussed in?
- What secondary information needs to come under each of the headings?

Summarise your information into key areas to provide a coherent structure. For a very brief presentation three main points is enough to provide a strong foundation for your argument.

Write

Write a first draft based on the information that you have gathered and sifted. You can either do this in full or in simplified notes. It may be easier to start off with a full account of your information to make sure that you are fully confident with your content. More experienced presenters often write down key words or phrases to act as a prompt for the presentation that they have written 'in their heads'.

Once you have written the main body of your presentation:

- **Write an introduction**

This should welcome your audience and introduce the key themes of your presentation. Also describe how you will discuss your information, lay a map down in the minds of your audience.

- **Write a conclusion**

This should summarise the content of your presentation. Summarise your main points and introduce a final point or question to linger in the minds of your audience encapsulating the spirit of your presentation.

- **Read through**

Practice reading through your presentation and time how long it takes.

Check

Once you have written your presentation you will need to check how long it is and whether the structure is effective. Have a go at reading your presentation out loud as you would to an audience.

How does this compare with the time you have been given?

If the text is too long you will have to prioritise information, editing out that which seems superfluous.

If the presentation is too short, think how it can be fleshed out a little. What extra information can you now afford to put in?

Injecting life

There are many ways of involving your audience in your presentation. These two simple suggestions will help focus your audience's minds:

- **Ask questions**

A question immediately draws the audience in and gets them thinking. Your tone of voice also changes when you ask a question thus avoiding one continuous monotone.

It is often best to simply pose rhetorical questions rather than expect your audience to respond. Asking a question where you move on to supply the answer will change your intonation whilst keeping the pace bubbling along.

Use questions to introduce new sections, answering them as you go!

- **Use quotations**

A quote again illustrates your key points and changes your intonation. Remember to make your quotations relevant and short.

Quoting other people or making references to other information will also add an element of authority to your presentation, helping the overall effectiveness of your work.

Reading from notes

You will need to think carefully about how you are going to deliver your presentation. Some people prefer to learn the whole thing as if they are learning lines from a script. Others use full notes to read from.

Perhaps the most useful method is to combine elements of the two. Familiarise yourself with your material to the point that you will only need structured notes to guide you. There is nothing worse than someone reading their notes word for word. They keep their head down and plough right through. On a more practical level, if you lose your place it can be difficult to find your way back.

It may help you to condense your notes onto presentation cards, summarising the key topics from each section. You can then use them as prompts to guide you through your presentation. Cards will be much easier to handle than sheets of paper when making your presentation and because they only contain key ideas you will be able to retain your spontaneity. Nervous shakes also tend to show up more with rustling leaves of paper!

You should always aim for spontaneity rather than deadpan familiarity, but you need to ensure that your topics flow smoothly from point to point.

Practice makes...

You might find it useful to practise in front of an audience. Be careful to only choose people that you can rely upon to give constructive comment. It also helps if they know a little about the subject. If you can't find an audience then practise in front of a mirror or, even better, make a tape recording. Listen back for hesitations, mumbblings and repetitive words and phrases.

If you are using audio-visual aids then remember to take this into account during your practice. For example, how will you stand in relation to the overhead projector or data projector? How much time will you spend on each slide? The more detail you can include at this stage, the better you will be able to visualise the final impact.

Further information

This Study Advice Sheet has been produced by Student Services at UW.

We support student learning across the University through the publication of materials such as these.

Other study advice sheets that you may find useful include:

Essay writing

Learning at university

Learning journals

Minimising stress

Organising yourself

Reading efficiently

Revision and exam skills

Study at a distance

Taking notes

Using feedback to improve your work

What does the question mean?

Working in groups

Writing reports

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

www.worcester.ac.uk/studyskills

or you can follow the links from your SOLE page.

You may also find it useful to check out the 'Moving On' pack, accessible from the link on your SOLE page.

'Moving On' is a study skills package specifically designed to help you prepare for Higher Education & to become a successful student.

Contact: studyskills@worc.ac.uk

Speaking to others

When you are delivering your presentation, you need to remember your audience.

Keep in contact with your audience, look at them, try and make eye contact, and if the group is spread out make sure that you look around the room to involve them all.

Making eye contact around the room engages your audience's attention, shows that you are interested in sharing your presentation with them and helps them pay attention by addressing them directly. There is nothing worse than the presenter who speaks directly to the ceiling or the floor!

Remember, if you appear focused and interested, your audience will be too!

Handy tip

If you are too nervous to make eye contact, try focusing on people's foreheads and shift from head to head around the room. This will at least give the resemblance of eye contact and will help you to avoid staring into your notes or speaking to the ceiling.