

Preparing a SPOKEN PRESENTATION

1. How to prepare a spoken presentation

Here are some ideas to consider when planning and preparing your spoken presentation.

- WHO is your audience? Classmates, lecturers, examiners, experts/non-experts on your topic?
- WHY should the audience listen to you? Make it interesting and let your audience know why it is valuable for them. Tell your audience what is the most important information you want them to know.
- WHERE will your presentation take place? Check the room where it will be given and the facilities that are available. If the technology fails, can you still give your talk?
- WHEN will it take place? How long will your presentation be? Have you done a timed rehearsal?
- WHAT will you talk about? Organise your ideas. At the beginning tell them what you are going to say. At the end tell them what you have said. Don't overload people with too many new ideas.
- HOW will you speak? Consider your body language. Project your voice with your eyes. Consider using key visuals (but not too many)

2. What makes a good spoken presentation?

Think about the presentations that you have attended. Consider the presentation skills of your lecturers, tutors or teachers here at university. What makes these presentations interesting and engaging? What makes them tedious and an effort to sit through? Consider the following:

Structure of your talk

How do the ideas of your talk develop? Is there a clear structure for listeners to follow?

Introduction

Get your audience's attention. State what the main focus of your talk is. Explain how you have organised your talk. Let the audience know what to expect

Body of your talk

How many main points will you present? (Aim for around 5 main points). Think about how you will structure your information (e.g. chronologically, by cause & effect, spatial). Use visual aids.

Conclusion

Let your audience know you've finished. Plan how you are going to end your talk.

Think about your voice – emphasis / intonation / speed / volume / pronunciation

What do you sound like? A good way to find out is to record yourself and listen. Do you emphasise key words or terms? Do you speak in a monotone or do you vary the way you use your voice? A very common problem is to speak too quickly and not pause enough or in appropriate places. Think about how loudly you speak and whether your voice is clear. If English is your second/additional language, do you think your pronunciation will be easily intelligible to your listeners?

Repetitive habits

Most people are unaware of the repetitive movements and sounds they make. Things like rocking from one foot to the other, or *excessively* saying "um", "err" etc. can be very distracting for the audience. What do you do?

Body language

Make eye contact with the whole room; sweep the audience from left to right; don't get stuck on one person or talk to only one side of the room. Don't look down at your notes, at a computer, or up at a screen for long periods. Consider the impact of your hands. Don't fidget or fiddle with notes, pens or other equipment. What message does your posture give? Stand up straight, facing the audience. Try to appear relaxed and confident, even if you feel nervous.

Reading verbatim

Reading a presentation word for word can be very boring for the audience. On the other hand unless you're really clear about everything you want to say, sometimes reading short sections of your talk might make your talk easier to follow. It really depends on how well you read aloud. Reading aloud is a real skill and one you need to practice. If you need to read, read to the audience, not to your notes. Remember that what you have written on your page might appear short, but when you read it aloud it may take longer than expected.

Visuals (slides, powerpoint, video, OHT's etc)

Will you use visual aids? If you do, don't use too many (As a general rule, try to not use more than one slide per 2 minutes of presentation time). Make them big and clear, uncluttered. Avoid unnecessary graphics or sound effects. How will you explain your visuals? (Don't read aloud each slide). Are you familiar with the technology to manage the visuals? Have you rehearsed using the technology? Give your audience time to take in what's on each slide. Don't use visuals unnecessarily – it should be clear why you use each one. Remember your presentation is being done by you, not by your slides.

Being organised

Some people can talk with very little preparation. However, for most people this results in a disorganised presentation that is difficult to follow and/or not very interesting. Being disorganised can also increase your nervousness. Always rehearse your talk out loud rather than in your head. Things often come out differently when we stand up to give a talk.

Interesting or boring?

Get the interest of the audience by including them and personalising your talk. Use stories where possible. Avoid describing things in details if not absolutely necessary (e.g. avoid describing each step of your methodology, or results). Get to the interested part of your presentation quickly. Don't leave it till then end when you run the risk of not having enough time and you end up rushing through the most important parts.

Rehearse

Do a run through in conditions that will be similar to the real thing. Say your talk out loud while standing up. Use your notes and slides. Time how long it takes. If too long, cut out something. Ask a friend, classmate, or family member to be your audience and ask them for feedback (e.g. What were the main points I spoke about? What are my weaknesses? strengths?). Audio/video record your rehearsal and listen/watch yourself. What do you do well? What needs changing? Modify your talk and rehearse again.

3. Managing your nerves

Be prepared and have something to say. Look at giving a spoken presentation as an opportunity to develop your skills. Focus on your audience's needs. What is important for them to know? How can you get this message across? Practice your presentation. During your talk breathe to relax. Don't race or speak too quickly. Remember to keep breathing and keep your knees bent just slightly – it's amazing how adopting a relaxed posture, can actually makes you relax!

4. Dealing with question time

Question time at the end of a talk is something inexperienced speakers are sometimes afraid of. This is often because they are worried that they won't be able to answer the questions. Look upon this time as an opportunity to interact with your audience. The fact that people ask questions can be an indication of their interest in your talk. It can also be the time when the best communication can take place. You may also get a number of new ideas or new ways of looking at your topic.

Here are useful strategies (and phrases) for managing question time well.

Fielding questions

If there is nobody chairing the session, you need to take control of which questions to answer first. Try to appear genuinely interested in receiving questions – don't look as if you can't wait to run back to your seat.

You might need to repeat the question to make sure that everybody in the audience heard it and can be included in the discussion. (This is particularly important during video conferences). Be aware of how much time is left. Indicate to the audience when you'll finish (e.g. I'll take one last question).

Checking you've understood the question

Rephrase the question E.g. As I understand it, you're saying XXX. It seems that..., It looks as if..., It seems to me that you're suggesting XXX. Make an educated guess about what somebody means.

Dealing with difficult questions

Don't panic and don't rush your answer. Some useful phrases are:

- You're quite right. I hadn't thought about that aspect.
- That's a good question. I don't know the answer. Would anybody else like to comment on this?
- That's a very interesting question; however it's not something I've looked into.
- While XXX is important, it's too complex to deal with here.
- Would you mind if I dealt with that question later?
- In this project we limited ourselves to XXX.
- I suggest you look at (reference). She/he discusses that issue.

Dealing with 'difficult' people

- Can we come back to that later? I'd like to talk about XXX now
- I think we should focus on X not Y.
- I think we've said enough on that question. I'd like to move on to XXX.

5. Other resources

- Spoken communication. VU LibGuide <http://guides.library.vu.edu.au/speaking>
- Pronunciation - VU ASD Handout.
- University of New South Wales. A well-organised display of what you need to know for a seminar presentation <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/tutsem.html>
- University of Canberra. General guidelines for oral presentations <http://www.canberra.edu.au/studyskills/learning/oral>
- University of Adelaide. English for uni?. *Academic oral presentation skills*. Some examples of good and bad oral presentations. (Created by Flinders University and hosted on an Adelaide University webpage). <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/english-for-uni/oral-presentation/>

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