



Oral Presentations

Conquering Fear of Public Speaking

Ignore the popular claim about the fear of public speaking being stronger than the fear of death: this is an urban legend. Think of something complex you have achieved in your life that looked intimidating before you started it. From the other side, it appears far less frightening. The strategies that help us succeed with lab reports, essays or larger life challenges also apply to public speaking: break things down, be clear, and practice, practice, practice. Think again of the complex achievement you had in mind a moment ago: your familiarity with it gives you confidence. By budgeting enough time to carefully craft and systematically practice a presentation, you will be confident about it before (and while) you deliver it.

Simple, Clear, and Confident

The fundamentals of public speaking remain the same in any context, be it classroom, conference, parliament or crowded city square. Think of historical figures who are famous for public speaking. Mahatma Gandhi, Winston Churchill, Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X, Chou En Lai and famous religious figures use simple and clear language to get across complex points. They pause when they speak. Take a note from your favourite public speaker and strive to do the same: keep the delivery **clear, concise and confident**.

Clear Structure

A logical structure stops you from leaping from idea to idea. A clear, brief introduction sets the scene and engages your audience. Simply saying “this presentation is about _____” turns people off. Let them know why your presentation is important. A good introduction is concise, tells the audience who you are and presents your thesis with key background information. Your introduction builds a rapport with the audience and allows them to easily follow what comes next.

Most of the presentation is the **body**. It supports your thesis with specific examples. Visual aids clarify your point and lend credibility to your presentation.

A strong **conclusion** summarizes your main points. Use the key words in your introduction to *briefly* re-state your argument. You might suggest further directions for research. End your presentation with a simple, strong statement.

Ask Yourself “So What?”

A presentation is not a dry list of disconnected facts. Like lab reports or essays, it makes a specific point. You are not simply re-hashing what others have done but contributing *your* original perspective to existing scholarship.

Never Read to an Audience

A good presentation is not written down word for word or memorized. **Never read a prepared text**. Certainly, you can use notes with a few key words jotted down to jog your memory, but do not write out and read complete sentences.

Speaking from point form notes keeps your delivery fresh. *Remember, you are talking to people, not reading at them.*

There is an exception: key technical details can be written down and read out, but always ask yourself: is this a small detail I can leave out or is it absolutely necessary? Bombarding an audience with a string of technical details is a bad idea. Always keep your eye on the main argument of your presentation.

Preparation

Know your subject inside and out. What is your purpose and focus? Know why your work is significant. Know your audience. Don't infantilize them by saying the obvious, and do not to speak above their knowledge level.

Rehearse! Focus on tone, volume, word choice, transitions, pauses and pacing. Note time limits. Time yourself and revise as appropriate. Practice your presentation before a friend or family member and ask for feedback. Record yourself and check for use of non-words such as "uhm" or "uh."

The audience is not out to get you. Try to step outside of yourself and understand the bigger picture. Inside, you may feel like an impostor, but objectively, your audience automatically accepts you as a peer. Whether you are in a classroom (where everyone else presents) or at a conference, your audience is primed to hear an interesting presentation. You are automatically granted legitimacy.

Visual Aids

These help organize your presentation and help the audience follow the main points. Do not over-do it for the sake of appearing technologically flashy. Do not use them as a crutch.

Visual aids can act as bullet point notes for you to flesh out. However, remember that technology doesn't always work. Always have a paper back-up of your notes. **Never read the exact words from slides that you present.**

For a detailed examination of using PowerPoint, see the "The Art of PowerPoint."

Props that you pass around can be very useful for a small audience but can be distracting or irrelevant to a large audience (where it can take a lot of time to pass the prop around to everyone). You do not want lag time between when you talk about a prop and when the twentieth person finally holds it.

Presenting

There is no substitute for being well-prepared. Make sure you have rehearsed your presentation many times. Do not leave things for the night before. This is the time to have a good meal and a good night's rest.

Get to the room well ahead of time. Listen to some relaxing music if this helps you. Make sure the technology is all up and running if you need to use it.

When presenting, speak in a loud voice. Slow down. People often speed up when nervous. Remember to pause. Avoid moving your arms around too much, and avoid other distracting body movement. Make and maintain eye contact.

Dress well. Your appearance should underline (not undermine) your credibility. Consciously and subconsciously, people judge us by how we look. Hence, dress appropriately for the occasion. While you might look odd dressing up in a three piece suit for a small seminar presentation, when in doubt, it is always better to dress up than to dress down.

Leave time to answer questions. You can pause to gather your thoughts before you reply, and if something is outside of your comfort zone, simply (and confidently) say “that is outside the scope of this research.”

Staying Calm

A presentation is not delivered by a disembodied mind. Your body is there too! Nervousness is a physiological reaction. Remember to take care of your body to avoid and decrease nervous energy.

- Sleep well the night before.
- Exercise in the morning or do yoga.
- Eat some comfort food for breakfast. Treat yourself!
- Breathe deeply from the belly before and during presentation
- **Chat with people in the audience before you present.** This breaks the ice, creates connections, personalizes the encounter and helps you feel more confident.

- Experts often suggest that you focus your presentation on a group of individuals instead of the entire audience. This makes it seem as if you are speaking to a smaller group. This is great advice, but make sure you focus on an attentive section of the audience! Looking at the people in the back row checking Facebook is not a good idea.

Remember These Small Details

1. Don't sit down, lean on a desk or hide behind a lectern.
 2. Don't talk to a blackboard or slide presentation: always face your audience.
 3. Try not to sway back and forth.
 4. And, above all... try to have some fun and, while maintaining professional decorum, put your personality into the presentation. Make it uniquely yours.
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