GIVING PRESENTATIONS

Presentations are becoming more common as university assignments because they develop a range of skills in oral and visual communication. Delivering a presentation gives you the opportunity to gain immediate feedback on your ideas from your interaction with your audience and from the questions they ask. However, this immediacy often means students find presentations nerve-wracking. Even experienced lecturers still get nervous when presenting, as they may be unsure how the audience will react and receive the information. Some nervousness and adrenaline helps produce a good performance and shows you care about your work. With good planning, preparation, and practice you can feel confident of delivering a professional presentation that suits your style. This guide covers the key principles of keeping it simple and giving successful presentations.

Preparing your presentation

Good preparation is key to a good presentation. If you have considered your audience, know what messages you want to communicate, and have thought about the clearest way of communicating these messages, you can go into your presentation with confidence. Keeping things simple and not including too much in either your presentation itself, or your visual aids, means you will be able to pace your presentation well and your audience will appreciate the information you wish to communicate. The advice in this guide shows you how to prepare a practically perfect presentation!

Thinking about your audience

A presentation is an act of communication between you and your audience. Tailor your presentation to suit your audience and their levels of knowledge.

- Who will be in the audience? Students, lecturers, fellow researchers, experts in the field, business people, general public, a mixture?
- Consider your purpose – to inform, show progress, persuade, sell, disseminate results, teach, or introduce a new idea?
- Will your presentation be an overview, basic introduction, develop an existing idea, go over old ground from a new perspective, summarise information, challenge beliefs, or show something new?

Planning your presentation

It is difficult to take in a lot of detailed information when listening. Therefore, it is very important that your presentation has a clear structure so your audience can follow it.

In a 10-15 min presentation you will only have time to make 3 or 4 main points. You will have more impact if your points are clear, simple, relevant, and direct.

**Beginning:** Introduce yourself. Outline the aims of your talk and what you will cover in the presentation. Start with an attention grabber, such as a picture, an everyday example, or a rhetorical question.

**Middle:** Your points should lead logically from each other. What does the audience need to know first in order to understand your subject? Then what do they need to know? What evidence will you use to support these points and convince the audience? Have clear sections or headings to structure the middle section and lead from one point to another.
End: Avoid introducing new information at this point. Summarise the main things you want the audience to remember. End positively with a strong concluding sentence, not an apology. Leave time for questions. If you are presenting to an external audience, have your contact details available for people.

When preparing your material, think about what you will be comfortable saying – don't include anything that you aren't happy with or don't have confidence in. Do your research and check your facts so that you can feel secure in your knowledge. Steer clear of jokes and humour if it doesn't come naturally to you.

What to avoid…
The most common mistake with presentations is trying to cram in too much information – you either end up talking too fast, or overrunning the time limit. Keep to 3 or 4 main points with an introduction that sets out the contexts and a brief summarising conclusion. You can always expand on these if there are questions afterwards.

Planning a group presentation can take longer than you think, as you have to arrange times to meet and coordinate everyone's contributions. See our Group Work Study Guide to help you work out what you need to do to make your group presentation succeed.

Notes, handouts and visual aids
Many people are tempted to write their presentation out fully and read it aloud, but this isn't enjoyable for the speaker or the audience; it is hard to get vocal expression and connection with the audience when reading aloud, and a written script is often more stilted and formal than natural speech. A better idea is to speak normally and use notes to guide you.

- It may be better to use a few file cards for your notes rather than a sheet of A4 paper – less flimsy and less tempting to hide behind!
- Use headings and key words to remind you of the main points and their order

Less is more – you want to be able to read them quickly at a glance
If you are using visual aids, note cues showing when you want to change slide
You can write reminders to yourself – like "slow down" if you tend to talk fast
Note down things you definitely don't want to get wrong: names, dates, statistics
Number your cards in case they get mixed up or dropped.

If you have been asked to prepare a handout, don't try to include too much information or your audience will spend more time reading it than listening to you. Include:
- a brief outline of your talk
- a summary of data
- references and further reading on your topic
- contact details

There are also various visual aids you may use. The most commonly used include PowerPoint slides, Prezi, video clips and posters. You might also use a flipchart or whiteboard, or have some physical materials you want to show.

If you use visual aids, keep them simple and make sure that they support and add emphasis to your argument – not distract the audience from what you are saying. Whatever you use, make sure you know how to find and use any necessary technology or equipment.

Visual aids can give you confidence, help you to remember the structure of your talk and ensure that the audience does not look at you all the time. They should enhance and illustrate what you say, making it easier for the audience to understand and remember. They are not supposed to dominate or distract from your talk.

Here are some common options and issues you may need to consider:

**PowerPoint slides**
These are common and easy to use, but may take a few minutes to set up, so plan this into
your timing. Ensure you have a backup plan in case the technology doesn't work on the day, such as having the slides on a memory stick as well as on the network drive, or having handouts of the slides to give out. Check you know how to change between slides using the mouse or a remote control. Beware of sound effects on animations!

*Prezi*

Prezi (link below) is a non-linear alternative to PowerPoint. It provides templates that are often similar to mind-maps, and you are able to zoom in and out, and navigate round them in different ways. Be careful not to overdo the zooming and movement as it can be very disorientating for the audience. It is easy to get carried away with exploring the features of Prezi, meaning it can take far longer to prepare your presentation. However, if used well, Prezi can be a powerful presentation tool. Be aware that the free version of the software provides access to your presentations online, so there needs to be a reliable internet connection in the presentation venue.

*Video clips*

It can be effective to break a presentation up with a short video clip to illustrate a key point. There are many educational videos available on YouTube and via TED Talks. However, make sure any videos are professional, appropriate, and relevant. Always ask yourself why you are using it and if you haven't got a good reason, leave it out. Check the sound, projection, and internet facilities in the presentation venue beforehand, and have an alternative plan in case the video won't play on the day.

*Flip charts / white board*

These are more suitable for small group discussions, as they simply can't be seen at the back of a large hall. Make sure you have non-permanent pens to write on the whiteboard. Also practice writing in large, clear letters so that it is easy to see.

*Handouts*

Handouts can mean the audience doesn't have to copy down all the slides - but they can also be distracting, as people read them instead of listening. If you are presenting to a large audience (for instance at a conference) it can be expensive to provide handouts. Consider whether they can be sent via email or put on a website instead. If you're going to share them (or PowerPoint slides) electronically, it may be better to save them as PDFs.

*Props*

Showing an object may be useful as a focus for discussion with a small group. It will work better as a replacement for part of your discussion (e.g. leave out some explanation) rather than reinforcing your message.

*Good slide design*

Keep your slides simple, uncluttered, and easy to read. Just because you can have music, moving graphics, and bullet points whizzing in and out doesn't mean you have to! But if you're confident about your technical ability, some simple animation can be very effective.

30pt font and above is best for large audiences. Avoid distracting backgrounds, and keep lots of white space between lines/sections. Choose a writing colour that shows up clearly on the background (avoid green & red), and for a professional presentation, stick to simple fonts and avoid cartoons. Keep unnecessary punctuation to a minimum. If you're going to use images, make sure they are there for a reason - to illustrate your point or make it memorable.

*Example:*

In your presentation, you might say something like:

“Classical Hollywood narrative usually traces a highly predictable story arc. The early part of the film is an exposition of the situations and characters the narrative will be concerned with. The status quo is disrupted by a complication of some sort. For instance, the hero and heroine are
parted for some reason, or the virtuous heroine is mistakenly seen as sinful. The last part of the narrative resolves that complication and restores the status quo. This narrative structure has been paraphrased as: Get your hero up a tree - throw rocks at him - bring him down."

Your accompanying slide might look like this:

**Classical Hollywood narrative =**
- Exposition
- Complication
- Resolution

It's a good idea to include a slide at the beginning of your presentation with your name and title, and follow this with a slide outlining your talk. End with a slide giving your contact details.

**Delivering your presentation**

Practice is a crucial step in overcoming nerves and giving a confident presentation. Running through your material, your timing, and thinking of potential questions beforehand means you will go into your presentation ready to deliver it well. Remind yourself that your audience will be supportive and want you to succeed (especially if they are due to present next!) The suggestions on this page will help you deliver a professional presentation that will engage your audience.

**Practising your presentation**

Practising builds your confidence, and enables you to sharpen up your presentation and check your timing. If you can, practice in front of friends or colleagues.

**Our tip...** Asking for feedback on specific aspects of your performance is likely to be more productive than saying "How did I do?" You might want to ask; "Was I talking too fast?" "Did you understand what I was trying to say?" "Did I wave my arms around too much?" etc.

Doing a proper rehearsal is the only way to see whether your timing is right. Your presentation will probably take longer than you think. If you are speaking for 10 minutes, prepare enough material for 8 minutes. Time yourself, then cut or condense points to make sure you are within the limit.

- Know what material you could skip over during your presentation if you are running overtime.
- If you do find you are under rather than over time, consider where you could expand.
- Practice in moderation – if you overdo it, you could lose your freshness and be tired with your material.

**Coordinating presenting in a group presents its own challenges.** See our Group Work Study Guide to help you work out what you need to do to make your group presentation succeed.

**Overcoming nerves**

Most people are nervous about speaking in public. Often this is because they are unsure about what they will face, and how to deal with it. Being well prepared and taking control can help to defuse these concerns.

Practising will give you more confidence about your timings. If you're using visual aids, check them carefully – make sure you are familiar with any technical equipment or have assistance.

If you are anxious that the audience will judge you, adopt a disguise! Dress more smartly than usual and play the role of a confident person for the day. Let them judge the disguise, not the real you.

If you are very nervous you may feel like you ought to apologise for this – or for other things like your accent, lack of time for preparation etc. It's better not to do this – apologising shows lack of confidence and will cause your audience to feel anxious too. Act confident, even if you don't feel
it. If you feel yourself getting anxious, take a few deep breaths, or have a sip of water - it'll give you an excuse to stop for a moment.

**Engaging the audience**

You can get your audience on your side by making sure that they enjoy the presentation. If you look nervous, they will be uncomfortable and that will make you more nervous.

- Take control of the room – signal the start by introducing yourself, and the end by thanking the audience and sitting down. Smile – you will feel better instantly, and the audience will warm to you.

- Make eye contact - looking up and out at the audience will help you create a connection. If you find this difficult, have a friend sit in the audience – you can pretend you're giving the presentation just to them and they can nod approvingly at you!

- Making eye contact also means you can check the audience's reaction. If they are looking puzzled, you may want to slow down and explain more.

- Be aware of your body language. Standing up straight, facing the audience, and looking welcoming can make a big positive difference.

It can be helpful to think about your speaking tendencies. Do you tend to talk too quietly, too quickly, or too flatly? Practice your presentation with a friend and ask them to comment.

It's tempting to write your presentation as if it were a script for you to read. Unless you are a practised actor, and know how to memorise and deliver a line perfectly, this rarely works. It looks more natural and sounds more interesting if you speak from brief notes – say three bullet points on each of your main points. Most importantly, always try to talk to your audience – not your slides or the screen on the wall!

**Timing**

Getting your timing right is absolutely vital. If yours is one of a set of presentations, overrunning is discourteous to the other presenters. Good time-keeping demonstrates a professional approach and respect for your audience and fellow presenters.

If you only have a brief amount of time, convey a clear message by focusing on main points only. It can be hard to cut down a lot of work on a topic (for instance, for your dissertation) to a few points. However, communicating a few ideas clearly is more effective than confusing the audience with a barrage of information. Remember that you can always expand in response to questions.

- Practise your presentation aloud.
- Try to speak clearly and at a natural pace.
- Don't be tempted to speed up to fit things in – think in advance about what you could cut out if you're overrunning.
- You can use pauses to emphasise important points or changes in subject.
- Try pausing for slightly longer than you think necessary – it won't seem that long for the audience.

**Dealing with questions**

The prospect of people asking questions can be anxiety-provoking. It may help to think of questions as a dialogue with the audience, not an interrogation. People are usually genuinely interested and sympathetic, and want to find out more.

It is a good idea to prepare for questions. Think of likely topics or types of questions people may ask, and how you might answer them. You may drop a hint in your presentation, such as "you can ask me more about this later..." if there is a particular area you want questions on. Or get a friend to ask a question that will give you the chance to expand on something you've mentioned briefly.

When you're answering, give yourself time to think by using phrases like "That's a good question, I haven't considered it that way before...", or "Could I get back to you on that
afterwards?" Remember that you are in charge – you can ask people to repeat the question if you haven't heard it, or politely ask for clarification if you're not sure you've understood it. You are the expert in your work, so keep control – but be open to discussion afterwards.

If there is a persistent questioner who keeps taking the floor, suggest that it might be better to continue that discussion afterwards, then ask if there are any other questions.

You might also want to think ahead about areas that you are concerned about. Prepare for questions about these. And don't be afraid to say if you don't know – you can open the question up to the audience: "What do other people think..." or "Has anyone else had any experience of this...?"

Poster presentations

Poster presentations are growing in popularity as a form of university assessment, and they are also a common means of presenting at academic conferences. Preparing a poster involves careful thought about how you will communicate your research in an accessible and engaging visual form. You need to put yourself in the audience’s position and consider how they will read the poster and how they will see the information. Think of yourself as a 'tour guide' when talking to people about your poster. It is often best to highlight key patterns and trends in your research rather than overwhelming your audience with detail; they can always ask questions if they want further information. The guidance on this page will help you produce and present effective posters.

Producing your poster

The first thing you need to do is check the size of poster you need to produce, whether it should be portrait or landscape, and whether you will have space for things like handouts, flyers and feedback sheets.

If you have a poster that you expect to present more than once, it may be worth designing it on Powerpoint, and getting it printed and laminated. (Most print shops offer this service.) However, this can be expensive. If you are only going to present the information once, it will be easier to produce the information in 'snippets' that you can cut out and arrange, either on a large backing sheet, or directly on a display board. Either way, you will need to think carefully about selecting the appropriate information, and arranging it so that the reader will be able to follow what you have done.

A poster presentation is not a whole essay or report stuck on a board. Plan your information as you would for an oral presentation – stick to the main points, succinctly made. Include an introduction which gives the background, and a summarising conclusion. Edit ruthlessly!

When you are designing your poster, place the title prominently and make sure the boxes that contain your information are placed in a logical visual pattern for your readers to follow. Include a box with credits for all the people involved in the research the poster describes.

Keeping plenty of white space around each box will make your information easier to read. Use a clear font like Arial or Verdana, and make it big enough to be read at a distance of between 1-2 metres. Bullet points can help the reader to identify important points.

If you’re more used to presenting information in writing, it may be difficult to work out how to do it visually and make it attractive and interesting, as well as accessible and readable. Ask yourself which types of visual communication you find easiest to read and are attracted to - and think about why that is. Then follow those principles for your own poster.

Handout, flyers and feedback

There won't be much time for people to view and take in the information on your poster, so it's helpful to have some information they can take away. This might include:

- a small version of the poster as a flyer
• a slip or card with the poster title, your name and email address if you don't want to give away your results

• contact details in case readers want to know more

One of the reasons for giving poster presentations is to get feedback on your research, so think about ways that people might give you this.

➢ You might have a feedback form that you ask people to fill in on the day
➢ Or ask them to email you with any comments
➢ One of the simplest ways to collect feedback is to have sticky notes available and a feedback sheet to stick them on.

On the day…

Don't forget to take: drawing pins, sticky pads or Blutack to put the poster up; contact details; handouts; pens and sticky notes for comments; most importantly, your poster!

Presenting your poster

You will still be expected to 'present' the information. This usually means standing by the poster and being prepared to talk through the information and answer questions. You are likely to be dealing with individuals or small groups.

As with oral presentations, it will help to rehearse what you want to say, and think about the kind of questions people might ask and how you will respond. People are more likely to interject to ask questions individually and discuss your research with you. You can get a lot of valuable feedback from talking to people about your poster.

When presenting a poster, think of yourself like a tour guide, guiding people around the highlights of your research. It will be less structured than a formal presentation, and more like a conversation that you are leading. However, all the key advice about good presentations still applies:

➢ Face the audience not the poster
➢ Speak slowly and clearly - don't rush

✔ Tailor your content to the needs and interests of your audience

✔ Highlight key overall trends in your research, as opposed to describing all the data in detail

✔ Allow time for questions

✔ It is fine to admit you don't know something - don't try to cover up or bluff

Our tip… Prepare a rough 1, 3, and 5 minute summary of your research to help structure your poster presentation. Then you can use the shorter or longer versions depending on how long people want to stay looking at your poster.

This guide reproduces the text of our LibGuide on Giving Presentations. The online guide has links to additional information and can be found at:

https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/presentations

For tips and guidance on other academic skills, see the Study Advice website at

www.reading.ac.uk/library/study-advice