Guidelines for Preparing a Presentation

Faced with having to make a presentation and not sure where to start? Or maybe you’ve always been trying to memorise a script and wonder if there’s a better way? Here are tips on how to prepare to deliver a presentation confidently.

# Planning Your Presentation

Prepare and practise your presentation using the extemporaneous (or “outline”) method. Recommended for business speeches, this method consists of planning a strategy, preparing your ideas carefully, orally composing and practising the speech, and rehearsing it thoroughly. The main goal is to *talk with your audience*, not to deliver a memorised script.

*Plan and prepare the message*

* **Analyse the audience, situation, context and task**, especially noting the constraints (e.g., time limit, audience pre-conceptions). Determine your purpose—what kind of image you want to project as a professional—and your strategy for achieving this purpose.
* **Create a focal point or theme** for your talk that establishes your credibility. Select and develop your “claims”[[1]](#footnote-1) from your experience to provide a strong identity. The relational aspect of this presentation suggests that you may need to be quite indirect about stating claims, particularly if the claim might make you sound arrogant. But you should not be so indirect that your audience is left wondering, “What’s the point here?”
* **Focus on one or two significant experiences** that will readily capture your audience’s interest and that will *say* something about you. Think about how you can relate these experiences to the audience vividly. Describe things and events concretely to create visual images for your listeners, or tell stories and use anecdotes to engage them.
* **Plan how you will develop rapport** with your audience through what you say and how you say it. Generate trust in your audience by being candid about yourself. Plan ways to interact with them. Show explicit awareness of your audience by relating to them as a group/individuals—bring them into your talk by referring to their experiences.
* **Prepare a tentative outline** or plan to organise and focus the materials.

*Compose and practise orally*

* **Compose the message orally** around major claims/points. Practise talking about each point, gradually developing confidence and shaping your material in appropriate language, and condensing it to fit the time constraints. Try them out informally with those you feel comfortable with (e.g., in a casual chat with family/friends).
* **Refine the outline**, especially noting the transitions between points. Prepare an introduction to capture the audience’s attention and to provide some idea about what you are going to say. Compose a conclusion that alludes to what you have said and ends your speech with strength and style (but without formally summarising your points as you would in most business talks).
* **Practise the speech aloud**, emphasising conversational style. Adjust the outline as you practise, deciding what works best and checking for how much time each point requires. Cut, condense and refocus if you have too much material; elaborate on significant points if you have too little.
* As you practise, **condense the outline** to keywords on note cards and cues that will trigger your memory.

# *Rehearse your presentation*

* **Rehearse the presentation aloud** in private, referring to your outline. Gradually put your notes aside as you rehearse, thinking of your ideas, not the outline. When you feel confident about the material, rehearse in front of a live audience, if possible. Throughout rehearsals, time yourself and select the points to adjust.
* Apply all of your **verbal delivery skills** to convey your message. Speak loud enough so that everyone can easily hear you. Vary the delivery speed and volume, emphasising key points. Pause occasionally.
* Integrate your **non-verbal delivery skills** to support your points and enhance your professional image. Establish eye contact with your audience, vary your facial expressions to reflect your meaning and feelings, and integrate gestures to reinforce your message. Stand up straight on both feet and take a step or two occasionally, moving between points.
* **Aim to establish rapport** with the audience by expressing yourself enthusiastically and engaging them in the talk. Strike a balance between modesty and salesmanship, sounding appropriately confident. Use familiar, inclusive language (like “we” and “us”).

# Getting Ready to Speak

Now that you have planned, prepared and rehearsed your presentation, you are ready to tell your audience about yourself. You should have a brief outline of your presentation prepared, typed out and not exceeding one page. Submit this to your tutor at the start of the class.

Here are some other tips to bear in mind as you get ready to speak.

* **Do not feel constrained to follow the outline.** An outline is a tentative plan, not a script for your talk. A dynamic business presentation is responsive to the audience, and is not just focused on delivering your message. In fact, you can make substantial changes just prior to speaking or even while you speak. You may omit, add or substitute materials to adjust to the audience, situation, time constraints and/or new ideas (e.g., in response to another speaker).
* **Do not be too dependent on your notes** during your presentation. Holding notes or cards often tempts the speaker to “fiddle” with them, clutch them instead of gesturing naturally, or stare at them and ignore the audience. Focus on the ideas you want to communicate instead of your performance.
* Before your presentation, **manage any nervousness** by thinking positively about communicating with your audience instead of *performing* for them. Develop a plan to deal with your anxieties if you tend to be nervous (e.g., do some diaphragmatic breathing—look this up on the Web).
* Be mindful of the **3-minute time constraint** and adjust your presentation accordingly. While presenting, do not panic if you find that you’re in danger of “over-running” the time limit—maintain your poise and conclude quickly without talking faster to finish everything you planned to say. Avoid stopping abruptly and stating that you’ve run out of time.
* Finally, **smile and enjoy yourself**, and your audience will too!

1. A “claim” is a viewpoint or a position statement about you; an opinion or a conclusion that you are trying to establish with the audience. The claim must be supported by evidence that defines, explains and substantiates it appropriately for the audience. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)