Preparing and Giving Presentations: A Guide for Beginners

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Giving presentations, and public speaking in general, often fills people with dread. This guide is written for inexperienced presenters and beginners who are not quite sure how to go about preparing and practicing their presentations, and becoming more confident in front of an audience. It presents a few starting points and considerations for setting up a public talk, building a slide deck, presenting it, and managing anxiety in front of an audience. It was written with university students and young academics in mind, but can apply more widely to any novices who are faced with the daunting task of delivering a presentation.

A good presentation delivers a focused message that is relevant and interesting to the audience. It follows a logical structure with an engaging story and effective visuals. A good presenter is confident, engaging, and speaks clearly. This is all easier said than done. The greatest piece of advice I have ever received on public speaking was to ***always give a presentation you yourself would want to hear.*** All this information below will hopefully help you do just that.

1 What am I doing?

The first step to taking on any activity - including creating and delivering a good presentation - is to figure out *what is it that you are trying to do.* For public speaking and presenting, this has two components:

- **Why am I giving this presentation?** What are my goals and motivations? Being clear about the reason and goal for a presentation will help you maintain focus and clarity, so that your content, visuals, and delivery align with your specific objective.

  If you are reading this for the first time and staring down the abyss of trying to design a presentation for a course assignment, you'll probably say: I am giving this presentation because I have no other choice, and my goal is not to fail this course. Which is fair, but not productive. Instead, think of what do you want to achieve by giving a presentation. If you are a student working on a class assignment, you want to showcase your background research. Your content will be focused on presenting insights from primary sources and data trends, and you will avoid making too many jokes or inviting audience participation.

- **What am I saying?** The purpose of presentations is to deliver a *specific* insight or a message. It is really as simple as that. I discuss this in more detail in the context of content design, but for now, think about this: what is the one thing you want your audience to remember after your presentation?

  Let's say you need to deliver a 15-minute presentation on the relationship between using a cell phone in bed and sleep quality as a course assignment. Your goal is to showcase your research so that you can get a good grade, but your message is not *"I did all this research, look how awesome I am."* Your message is the main conclusion from all that work, for example: *"sleep quality is negatively impacted by using cell phones in bed."*

1.1 What kind of a presentation am I giving?

Once you know *what* you are trying to do, you need to consider *how* you are going to do it. In a "classic" presentation, a speaker stands up in front of an audience and talks about a specific topic for

a predefined amount of time, which is then followed by questions. You will see this in exams, project status updates, lectures, or conference presentations. Even if some questions are asked during the presentation, it is typically the presenter who does the majority of the talking and controls both the presentation flow and other's ability to participate.

There are considerable differences in preparing and delivering presentations in different formats:

- An **in-person** presentation assumes that everyone is gathered physically in the same room. The speaker can rely on the audience's body language to estimate their interest and confusion, and adjust tone and pacing accordingly. Audience members can also raise their hands to ask a question or alert the speaker to a technical glitch, and more often than not the raised hand will be noticed. The speaker can use gestures and point to things on their slide with a hand or a laser pointer. If possible, the presenter moves around the stage a bit, which makes it more difficult to rely on written notes during the presentation. Audience members can come up to the speaker after the presentation and continue the conversation, which means that the presenter is "on the clock" for some time after their talk is done. In-person talks are much more permissive in terms of interacting with the audience, but they also put the entire spotlight on the speaker: there is no hiding nervousness.

- A **hybrid** presentation combines a physical talk with a streaming of some kind, and the audience is distributed between the physical location and remote presence. Technical constraints often limit the speaker's ability to point with their hand (and the slide deck needs to be designed with this in mind) and move around (so it might be easier to rely on written notes during the talk). The speaker also must be mindful of the disconnect between the local and remote audience, as the remote audience might not be able to catch a contextualized joke. Ideally, a hybrid presentation will have a separate person dedicated to monitoring the stream, and alert the speaker to any questions or technical issues with the stream. Since there is still a physical presence aspect, the speaker is "on the clock" for some time after their talk is done.

- An **online** presentation has no physical presence, and both the presenter and the audience are online. Interaction with audience becomes limited by webcams and microphones, and talk attendees often prefer to have those turned off. Unless some people keep their cameras on, it becomes almost impossible to monitor engagement and focus, so the speaker is left to their own estimates for how to pace the talk. The online format also removes any possibility of relying on body language, gesturing, and pointing with a finger, which impacts your slide design and forces you to use your mouse to point to things on slides. At the same time, you are free to rely on your notes to a much larger extent than during in-person talks, and nobody can see your nervous fidgeting outside of the camera's frame. And when the talk is done, it is done: you can just walk away from your computer.

1.2 How much time do I have?

Your presentation should not take longer than it is supposed to take. Going over time is frustrating and disrespectful to your audience, and other speakers if your talk is part of a larger event. It is also stressful to you as a presenter, because you are likely going to rush through part of the talk and possibly miss an important point.

Your allotted time translates to some practical considerations if you are using a slide deck: *how many slides* you can realistically present. There is no hard formula for this. I think it is helpful for a novice speaker to assume 1-2 minutes per slide as a starting point, and adjust the numbers as you build your deck and rehearse your presentation. This 1-2 minutes per slide estimate can be helpful when you're trying to decide if you put too much information on one slide. If it takes more than two minutes to explain, you might want to consider splitting the slide into two. With this estimate in mind, a five minute talk should contain no more than five slides, a ten minute talk - no more than ten slides, and so on.

But if you create 45 slides for a 45 minute talk, your audience will be justified in walking out. Why? Because people have real limits on how much information they can process. Paying attention is exhausting. The longer your audience is forced to pay attention, the more fatigued they will be, and therefore slower to process what you are saying. You can reasonably ask your audience to be

laser-focused on your five minute flash talk, but maintaining that speed and intensity for 45 minutes is not possible.

Longer presentations require different pacing to keep your audience engaged: provide more context for your insights, recap the most important points as you go, remind your audience how you got to a specific conclusion or a decision. Consider involving your audience in some way too, for example by inviting people to estimate your results or asking for a simple vote. You should also build in couple short pauses for your audience to catch up with you, and for you to take a breath and drink water. A lot of inexperienced presenters fear any silence during their presentation, but it is important to take a few seconds every now and then to look around the room and check if your audience is engaged or looks confused. And take actual breaks: my rule is 15 minutes off for every 45 minutes of talking.

1.3 Who is my audience?

A good presentation is tailored to fit the needs, interests, and knowledge level of your audience. After all, they are the *public* in *public speaking*. Consider the following:

- **Language**: Your presentation must be understood by the audience. As a general rule, be mindful of your pronunciation and pace. Consider the context for estimating how formal your language should be. Also consider whether there are non-native speakers in your audience: if you know you are talking to a group that might struggle with the language, simplify a bit more than usual.
- **Jargon**: Your presentation must be tailored to your audience's technical knowledge. If you are speaking to a room full of professionals that you know for a fact are familiar with certain jargon, then go ahead and use it. However, we tend to overestimate other people's familiarity with jargon, so if you are using it, consider defining some terms anyway.
- **Examples**: A professional presentation (an exam, an academic conference) might warrant using more formal examples, as opposed to a layman-oriented popular science talk or teaching.
- **Humor**: Will your audience appreciate humor, and, if yes, what kind? Obviously more formal presentations will not include many jokes. But even a less formal presentation can fail to land some humor if the audience is not on the same page as the presenter about what's funny. For anxious speakers, a joke that fails to land properly can be painful and detrimental to their confidence.
- **Body language**: A formal presentation will require that you are more reserved with your movements, stand up straight, and try to limit wild gestures. It is a bad idea in any presentation to slouch, lean over furniture, keep your hands in your pockets, or turn your back towards the audience. For online talks, body language becomes almost a non-issue as it is not captured by webcams; in that case, still make sure to keep your back straight and look at your screen as you present.
- **Interpersonal dynamics**: There is a chance you will be presenting to people you know well, such as classmates and coworkers. You may know that a specific boss enjoys jargon, or a coworker has a bit of an adversarial attitude towards you. Adjust accordingly.

While we are on the topic of audience analysis, consider *what it means to be a good audience member.* When you listen to other people's presentations, be mindful of small behavioral cues you are giving: taking a nap in the back of the room or swiping through social media during a boring talk might feel inconsequential to you, but could be making a nervous speaker panic. If you are using your laptop, the presenter can easily tell if you are paying attention and taking notes or doing something different (and likely distracting people behind you). In general, a good audience member should avoid sleeping or looking too bored, look at the speaker/their presentation, limit multitasking (such as playing on your phone), and, if possible, sit up straight (or show other body language cues for paying attention). If you're attending a talk online and the bandwidth allows it, turning on your camera can make a big difference for the presenter's confidence as well.

2 What do I talk about?

Now that you analyzed the basic parameters of your presentation, the time has come to discuss what to talk about. There is a very real limit on the amount of information your audience can retain in one sitting. That's why people usually take notes during more complex and information-loaded presentations such as lectures. In designing a presentation, ask yourself: what is the *one thing* that I want my audience to remember after they leave the room? (we defined this already in *what am I saying?*) Then, what are the *three things* that are almost as important? Those are the facts or insights you should build your presentation around.

2.1 Content

Start with building a structure. Consider the format and the goal of your presentation that you defined earlier, and start with a clear outline. There are two strategies for deciding what content (information, insights, facts) you should include in your presentation:

- **the subtraction strategy**, where you outline all the information about the project you are presenting, then start cutting stuff out until you reach the allowed presentation volume. This strategy is **wrong**. If you cut things out, then you will be left with holes in the logical progression.
- **the addition strategy**, where you start with the main point (argument, result, problem formulation etc.) that you want your audience to understand. Then you expand and keep adding information and other necessary details until you reach your allowed presentation length and covered all important points. This strategy is **correct**. By adding to your main point, you are guaranteed to say the thing you want to say in the most coherent and logical way.

Your outline will then turn into a storyboard: a slide-by-slide breakdown of what information goes where, and how it is presented.

2.2 Structure

Now that you decided on which ideas you want to share, they need to be put in a logical order. A presentation, like any argument, should broadly follow a typical structure: introduction, body, and conclusion. You should spend the majority of your time and effort on presenting the body of your information and discussing the relevant details.

First, you introduce your audience to both yourself and your problem statement. Start with a cover slide where you state the title of your talk and who you are. Include a date and location of the event on the slide. This is also a good opportunity to give a brief verbal preview of what you will be talking about, a maximum of two or three sentences to align your audience's expectations.

Then, you present a strong introduction. This includes your problem statement, hypothesis, background information on where you identified a knowledge gap in literature, or a challenge you are solving. This is the context and framing for your presentation. There is also the issue of an outline: some presenters include a slide with the outline of their talk. In my opinion, if you are giving a short talk (up to 15 minutes), it is fine to give the outline verbally and without a dedicated slide. However, for longer talks, a separate slide with an outline is helpful.

Your body includes the data or other insights that you want to deliver to your audience. If you have more than one, remember to put them in a logical order and follow a linear progression of events: A, then B, then C. For longer presentations, consider adding a visual indicator for where you are in your presentation (such as a slide counter or a progress bar). Remember that listening to your talk is cognitively demanding for your audience, and they have a limit on how much information they can remember. If a piece of information from topic A is important for topic B, reiterate that information when discussing B. For example: imagine you conducted a customer survey on satisfaction with new product packaging, and the first part of your presentation discusses respondent demographics, where 80% of your respondents are childless. In the second part, you discuss the finding that only 20% of the the respondents wanted the packaging to be child-proof (so that kids cannot open without parental supervision). You cannot reasonably expect the audience to remember the demographic breakdown of the survey and apply that information to understanding this finding: you need to repeat the important information at the time it is needed.

Lastly, you need conclusions and a summary, where you reiterate the main arguments and take home messages from your presentation. This is customarily followed by a thank you slide, where you acknowledge everyone who has directly contributed to this work and thank the audience for listening.

2.3 Slide deck

It is fairly uncommon to give a presentation without an accompanying slide deck, so you are safe in assuming that you will need to design one as well. Remember that your slides are a visual aid to your presentation. They are supposed to support your argument, provide visualizations, and help structure your talk. There are many excellent resources online on how to make your deck appealing and visually pleasing (and many examples of what not to do), but the basic gist of it is as follows:

- Slides need to be *readable*: use sufficient contrast between text and background so that your presentation is legible, especially if you are presenting in a bright room or on an old projector. Similarly, use minimum 30 points font size, especially if you are presenting in a larger room.
- Slides should be *consistent*: use the same font across your presentation (unless there's a good reason for using more than one), and maintain a consistent color-blind friendly color scheme and layout. If you are presenting data, color code it consistently across slides as well.
- Animations and other special effects must *serve a purpose*: really well done and thought through special effects can add a lot of visual value to your presentation, but their design is tricky and time consuming. Poorly designed and flashy effects are unnecessarily distracting. A simple, "clean" deck is preferable to one with random effects, no matter how tempting it might be to include animated transitions or sounds that are easily available in slide design software.

Lastly, the perennial question of slide design: *how much text should you put on one slide?* The text on your slides is not the transcript of your talk. Ideally, write only the bare minimum that your audience has to remember, and write it as points, not as full sentences. A well-designed slide will include minimal text with an illustrative visual. Switching between reading blocks of text on slides and listening to the presenter is exhausting for your audience. *However*, your presentation serves a very specific purpose for a very specific audience. Slides used for teaching complex theoretical materials are likely to contain more text than slides used in a persuasive presentation showcasing a luxurious hotel to tourists. Always match your content and form to your goals.

2.4 Figures

Graphs and other visual representations of data and numerical trends require special treatment in your presentation. If you are including a graph on your slides, you must explain it during your presentation. Do not include graphs and assume that the audience will immediately understand them, no matter how simple the graph.

The moment you put a figure like this on the screen, your audience will immediately stop paying attention to you and start trying to understand the graph. This is why, as soon as you present a graph, you must walk your audience through reading it with you. There is a simple structure for that:

- Step 1: a one-sentence explanation of what this graph demonstrates. For example[1]: This graph shows the relationship daily consumption of candy and self-reported happiness in Denmark.
- Step 2: read axis labels out loud. On the x-axis, we see self-reported happiness measured on the scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being extremely unhappy and 10 being extremely happy. On the y-axis, we see daily consumption of candy, reported in grams.
- Step 3: describe the data trend. Overall, we see a positive correlation between eaten candy and self reported happiness. However we also notice that around the two kilograms of candy eaten in a day, the happiness plateaus, and decreases sharply around five kilograms a day.
- Step 4: reiterate any conclusions. Our findings imply there is such a thing as too much candy.

[1] I made this up, and I am not including a graph here so you can see how a good explanation works even in the absence of a visual aid.

3 How do I do the actual talking?

Now that you've designed your presentation, you also have to deliver it. This can be particularly nerve wracking for inexperienced presenters, especially if you have some anxiety surrounding public speaking or just being the center of attention. I have good and bad news here: the good news is that fear of public speaking goes away with practice. The bad news is that you have to practice.

Important note on using microphones: if you are presenting in a large room and there is a microphone available, **use it.** Always. No discussion. I do not care that it feels weird, awkward, or silly. I also do not care that people in the back said they could hear you. Using a microphone is a matter of accessibility, and therefore it is not negotiable.

3.1 Using notes and other memory aids

A well-designed slide deck contains summaries of all core points you need to make during your presentation. If your presentation is short and you rehearsed it enough, you should be able to present without relying on any additional notes. Longer talks might require additional notes to make sure that you are organized and not missing important points. Notes can be distracting, and it is important to use them effectively.

Your notes should be concise, containing only bullet points, short phrases, or even single keywords. They also need to be designed (font, size, color) in a way that allows you to easily and quickly find the information you need, without losing your train of thought. Some presentation software allows you to keep notes on the screen, but some presenters prefer having their notes on index cards instead. If using index cards, number them! Place your notes somewhere where reading them does not make you appear disengaged: for example, don't hide them under a table, because then you'll look like you're staring at your feet.

3.1.1 Scripting your presentation and reading from a paper

Under no circumstances should you ever read your presentation directly from a paper. It is a hard no, no matter how anxious you might be. People who read from a script often shift into a very monotonous tone, fail to maintain meaningful eye contact with the audience, and generally tense up (as too much movement makes it harder to follow text). When your audience realizes you are reading a prepared script instead of actually presenting, they will immediately stop paying attention to you.

Written language is different from spoken language, especially for novice presenters: it takes time and practice to develop a style of writing that is both simple and captures complex technical information. Novices tend to write in more complex sentences and employ more grammatically complex structures, and use more complicated and flowery vocabulary. If you then try reading such text out loud, you will not only sound unnatural, but chances are you will also stumble over words and have difficulty pacing yourself, which will also make you more nervous, so you will stumble over your words... you see where this is going. Even if you manage to flawlessly deliver a complex text during your presentation, there will be questions afterwards, and you will be answering them in your regular, unscripted language, which will sound odd.

But the good news is that you can still script your talk if you're nervous. First and foremost, write your talk the way you would speak it, not the way you would write it. Try giving the presentation alone and record yourself, then transcribe and edit. That will give you an idea of what your spoken language sounds like, and can serve as a great starting point for scripting. Another option is talk out loud as you type, and see whether sentences and words feel natural. Use simple sentences, and simple words. It is a myth that complex grammatical structures and big words make you sound smarter. Here are two examples; try reading them out loud and see for yourself which version sounds better:

- **Complex**: Despite accounting for just 10% of the overall population, individuals who identify as highly introverted are 30% more likely to report higher levels of creativity, suggesting a potential link between introspection and creative thinking.[2] **Simplified**: Individuals who identify as highly introverted account for just 10% of the overall population. But they are also 30% more

[2] I made this up.

likely to report higher levels of creativity. This suggests a potential link between introspection and creative thinking.

- **Complex**: While comprising a mere 2% of the general population, individuals diagnosed with synesthesia exhibit a significantly elevated likelihood—nearly 80% higher than the average—to excel in fields requiring abstract cognitive abilities, illustrating a profound correlation between atypical sensory experiences and enhanced creative and intellectual capacities.[3] **Simplified:** Synesthesia is a condition where people experience mixed senses, like seeing colors when they hear sounds. Only about 2% of people have synesthesia. These individuals are almost 80% more likely to be very good at tasks that require creative thinking or problem-solving. This shows a strong connection between having unique sensory experiences and being skilled in creative activities.

Another thing to pay attention to while scripting is to give your sentences (and the overall talk) a linear progression: A, then B, then C. With written text, we can sometimes play around the timeline a little bit: in order to achieve C, we did A, which also resulted in B. I am not a fan of such structure, but readers can go back and re-read a sentence if they get confused about the cause-effect relationships in your narrative. They can't go back and re-read a sentence when you are speaking, so they will be forced to remember facts and assemble them into a linear progression on their own, while also listening to you, while also looking at your figures, while also paying attention for 45 minutes... don't do it to them. See for yourself which one is easier to follow when read out loud:

- **C, A, B (not linear) example:** Problems with short-term memory (C) can result from vulnerability to stress (A), which is often caused by sleep deprivation (B).
- **A, B, C (linear) example:** Stress (A) often leads to sleep deprivation (B), which in turn negatively impacts short-term memory (C).

Once you wrote out your presentation script, timed it, and edited it, it is time to practice. And when I say practice, I mean *practice*. Read it several times while advancing your slides. Memorize your content. Practice until it feels like you could give it without the script. Then practice more: look away from the script while talking as much as you can. Practice until you reach the point where you are no longer reading from script, but giving a well rehearsed presentation. Then cut down your script to a list of main points you need to make with each slide, and keep those as notes for your presentation. Practice until you don't even need to look at your notes anymore.

So yes, it is fine to write out a script for your talk. But no, it is not fine to read it to your audience.

3.2 Speaking in your own voice

Giving a presentation requires you to project your voice, which can be tiring. Practice talking from your diaphragm and taking deep breaths. Similarly, a lot of people get so nervous when they're presenting that their voice changes quite considerably and typically gets higher, which makes them come across as much more anxious. Speaking too quickly can make your voice go higher, so practice speaking at a moderate pace (this is also good for speaking clearly). That's why it's important to practice controlling your voice, so that you can project it better and speak more naturally. Go for a walk at a brisk pace and talk while you walk. Walk as fast as you can while still talking without loosing your breath. Try singing or just go into an empty field and scream.

3.3 Presenting in a foreign language

Public speaking is even more stressful when you have to do it in a foreign language, for obvious reasons. You might be even more tempted to script your talk and read it out loud when it's not in your native tongue. But, honestly, don't. Nobody in the audience is expecting a native-speaker level of fluency from you. Your audience members either sympathise with the issue (as they themselves had to deliver talks in a foreign language), admire your courage (as they are monolingual or too anxious to try delivering a talk in a foreign language), or simply do not care (as they are there to learn about your findings). The occasional asshole who thinks that "in here we speak X, so learn the language!" is welcome to step barefoot on a LEGO brick.

[3] I made this up too.

I guarantee you that nothing bad will happen if you mispronounce a word. Make sure that you check how to pronounce the keywords from your talk, but don't let a single mistake derail your confidence for the entire presentation. Also nothing bad will happen if you correct your own pronunciation during the talk. Do you know what will happen if you make a grammatical error? Also absolutely nothing. The point of presenting is to communicate results and conclusions in a coherent and understandable manner. Your presentation is also not a language exam or an audition for the local theater (and if it is, then please disregard this section). Run your slide deck through a spell checker or ask someone with a better command of the language to check your grammar in advance. But when you are presenting, the goal is communication, and a lot of communication can happen regardless of language mishaps.

Similarly, deliver the presentation at the language level that you are comfortable speaking. Do not ask a native speaker to write you a script for reading out loud. Do not write a script in your first language and then google translate it to the target language: the result is likely to be somewhat incoherent. Use simple sentences, simple grammatical structures, and simple words that are easy to pronounce - which is universal advice regardless of your fluency level.

4 How do I handle questions?

Now that you successfully delivered your presentation, it is time for questions from the audience. Think about potential questions as you are preparing your presentation, and consider making an extra slide or two if you have an interesting figure that could come up later.

Always listen to the full question before answering it. Make sure you understand what the person is asking you about. It is ok to ask for clarification as well: *If I understand you correctly, you are asking about (rephrase question here), is that correct?* I also take notes during questions, especially during more technical presentations. Some questions can be rather complex, and I want to make sure I am answering them well.

When answering, give yourself a moment to think. It's ok to take couple seconds to consider your answer. But do not start every single answer with *that is an excellent question!* Not all questions are excellent, and if you repeat that phrase too much, it will sound hollow and dishonest.

Lastly, it is ok if you do not know the answer. In that case, don't just say *I don't know* and move onto the next question. Admit that you don't know the answer, maybe explain why (e.g., *we considered including this hypothesis in our study, but our resources limited how many participants we could enroll and it was not realistic to address this question*), or try answering anyway (e.g., *I am not sure about the exact answer and this is something that I would need to double check, but my guess right now is that...*). You can also say: *This is actually a problem I do not know how to address in this research, if you have some suggestions I would love to talk more about it later.* All in all, it is fine to not know every single answer, but it is not a great look if you just shut down the conversation.

5 Extra advice for beginners

Confidence in presenting comes with (considerable) practice, especially if you uncomfortable with public speaking. The good news is that even the most anxious presenters will become confident with practice and experience.

5.1 How do I practice my presentation skills?

The easiest first step to overcoming anxiety is to practice a specific presentation you are preparing. Practice, practice, practice. With practice comes automaticity, which means that as anxiety creeps up, you will go on autopilot and still deliver a stellar talk.

First, practice your presentation alone. Grab a rubber duck, a stuffed animal, or put googly eyes on an apple and present to them. At this stage you will be able to test whether your logical flow is indeed logical, the slide deck is well designed, and your presentation fits in the allotted time.

Next, present to friends, roommates, groupmates, classmates, anyone who will listen. Ask them for *specific feedback*: is my presentation logical? Is my conclusion clear? Do I appear knowledgeable? Confident? Do I speak too fast? Are my slides distracting? Then actually apply their feedback and make revisions, and practice again. And again. Aaaand again.

Another way to practice is to record yourself presenting, and then do a self-critique. But I will be honest with you - I've never been able to do this. Instead, I practice in front of a mirror.

You can also practice in unexpected ways. Create alternative slide decks for your practice: one without any text, only with figures. Then another one without any figures, only text. Or practice delivering your presentation without any slides and see how that goes. The purpose of this is to be confident and well-rehearsed in the message you are delivering, and learn to rely on your deck as an aid, not as the central component of your presentation. And yes, I do realize that not every presentation can be delivered without any slides - that's why I want you to do it only for practice.

Practice your skills proactively. If you have anxiety around public speaking, you will avoid it at all cost - until there is no escaping it. And then you are twice as nervous, because you will be judged both for what content you deliver (and it's usually complex technical information), and how confident you are while doing it. So practice your public speaking *before* you have a big assignment. Make a presentation on something that you're passionate about, something that really interests you, or even something that is just silly and has absolutely nothing to do with your work. Make it fun, design a slide deck, and practice. You can also try powerpoint karaoke: an improv game where you deliver a presentation based on a deck you have never seen before. Getting ahead of your public speaking dread will make it easier to deliver serious technical presentations later.

5.2 How can I be more engaging as a presenter?

An engaging presenter talks *to* the audience. Remember that you are presenting information to a specific group of people, and that your purpose is to convey a message or an insight. That cannot happen without the audience being present and awake, and aware that you are talking to them. One piece of advice is to try and be natural. It's ok to gesture as you talk: beat gestures give your speech a rhythm, and often you can't control them, so don't worry about your hands too much. Straighten your back, stretch a little, take a few deep breaths: it will also help you speak more clearly and loudly. Practice speaking from the diaphragm, consider doing vocal warmups or other vocal activities to help you build a confident voice. Try maintaining eye contact, or just looking towards your audience as you present. Learn from others: find recordings of engaging speakers online and analyze what they're doing.

All things considered, there are also situational challenges. Some audiences are really easy to connect with. Some are just not going to respond to you even if you walk on stilts and juggle. It happens.

5.3 How do I deal with performance anxiety?

Performance anxiety is absolutely normal and expected from novice speakers, so first of all - please don't beat yourself up for it. Your best tool for dealing with performance anxiety is practice, and being so familiar with your presentation that you can deliver it on autopilot.

- Get enough rest the night before your presentation: do not keep rehearsing it or obsessing about it until sunrise. If you're not properly rehearsed by the evening before, that last bit of cramming is not likely to help you much. If you can't sleep, do some breathing exercises, go on a walk, or read a book. Avoid scrolling through social media and generally try to stay off your electronics.
- Drink enough water and have a snack before your presentation, even if you have a stomach ache.
- Get organized ahead of time: if you can, check if the tech works and air out the room.
- Warm up: do some deep breaths, stretch a little, do a vocal exercise if you can, play some pump up music or watch a funny video.
- Remind yourself: what is the goal of my presentation? What does "successful" mean here? Who am I talking to?

If you experience a sudden spike of anxiety during the presentation, just take a breath and drink some water. Will your audience see that you're getting anxious? Yeah, probably, but why does it matter? They will also notice that you are regaining composure and continuing with your talk. When

I feel that a sudden anxiety spike is coming, I remind myself about staying grounded: I straighten my back and wiggle my toes. I also noticed that I am less anxious when I walk around a bit or gesture; if I need to stand at a podium and the audience cannot see my hands, I will be squeezing something with my hand, like an eraser or a stress ball. Same during online presentations.

Think what sorts of behaviors you would want to observe in your audience, or what sorts of reactions would help you feel more confident. It might be helpful to "plant" a friend in the audience (if possible, of course): someone who will ensure that they behave exactly the way you need them to. You can ask them to frantically nod every time you make a good point (or even just look at them), or to give you a thumbs up and a big smile. Or you can ask them to look completely disinterested and play on their phone. They should do whatever you think that will help you calm your nerves without disturbing other audience members.

Don't forget to unwind after your talk: take a breath, drink some more water, have snack. If adrenaline is still running high later in the day, do some physical activity to release it. And if your talk went poorly? It happens. Reflect on what you should improve, and the next one will be better.