

Guidelines for giving oral presentations

The best insurance for giving a good presentation is careful preparation. While talks will differ in style and approach, a suggested framework to prepare an oral presentation is given below.

Preparing an oral presentation

You cannot speak effectively to an audience if you do not know who the people in the audience are. Before you begin planning your presentation, analyse your audience with regard to their professional and personal characteristics:

- Knowledge of the topic
- Technical expertise
- Educational and cultural background
- Their expectations from your presentation
- Their position in their own organisations
- Others

Find out about the facilities available during your presentation. The sooner you know, the easier the planning will become:

- What is the size and location of the room, how many persons will attend?
- What are the light conditions?
- What is the distance between you and the first row?
- What is available: laptop, projector, pointer, microphones?
- At what time of the day is your talk (i.e. after lunch, at the end of the day)?
- Is translation needed/available?
- Who does the logistics?
- Ideally, you can attend talks of other presenters before your own presentation to familiarise yourself with the conditions.

Structure

You cannot tell everything in a limited time -- be selective. Concentrate on the main lines and avoid very technical issues (e.g. do not provide the derivation of a complex formula. If somebody wants to know, he/she can consult your report).

Scientific presentations contain the key components of a scientific article – Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion and Recommendations.

- **Introduction** - use it to set the scene and provide a brief outline.
- **Methods, Results** - group most of the information under three- five main themes.
- **Conclusion** - recap and interpret the main points of the presentation. Do not forget recommendations!

In **presentations to a non-scientific audience** (e.g. to public health decision makers where the main aim is to persuade rather than to inform), the following style can be used/adopted:

- **Opening remarks** - to establish contact with the audience and explain why the topic is important

- **Purpose of presentation** - to inform audience of the perspective you are going to offer on the topic of your talk
- **Steps of presentation** – to enable audience to grasp the structure of your talk and aid their understanding of it.
- **Main body of presentation** -- logically arranged with adequate detail or examples to back up your main points.
- **Recommendations**
- **Summary**
 - Key points – to provide a clear reminder of the areas addressed
 - SOCO (Single Overriding Communication Objective)

Choose your visual aids

The purpose of slides is to save time, increase interest and attentiveness, clarify or emphasise an idea and increase audience recall of presented information. Remember that PowerPoint slides are only there to enhance/reinforce your performance, not to detract from the point you are making so keep them simple. The most common problem with slides is overcrowding. The print on a slide should be readable without magnification. To help simplify slides consider the following:

- Do not try to tell the whole story on one slide. Use key words only, (think in terms of headlines), not long lists of words or whole paragraphs. Audiences won't be able to concentrate on what you are saying if they are expected to read text on a slide.
- Convey only one main idea per slide.
- Express ideas in as few words as possible.
- If needed, consider including handout material containing extensive detail to supplement a more simplified slide.
- Instead of one complex slide make several simplified slides with a conclusion slide describing the overall concept.
- Use pictures, simple diagrams, graphs or tables where possible rather than text.
- Use a large point size (30pt) and a sans-serif font (Arial, Tahoma). Use upper and lower case, not all upper. If you want to emphasise a point use your voice not upper case text on a slide.
- A good general rule is not to exceed six lines, or 45 characters and spaces per line.
- Use contrasting colours for good legibility; for example dark-coloured fonts for texts on light background.
- Do not put yourself in a position to have to apologise for your slides. If you introduce a slide by saying "You may not be able to read this, but..." then simply do not show it.
- Choose to acknowledge your co-authors on the title, second or last slide. Avoid logos except for the title slide.

Choose appropriate style

- Think about your presentation as a performance. You need energy and enthusiasm to deliver what you say and grab the attention of your audience.
- Consider the tone and degree of formality which will be expected from you as the presenter.
- Use short, simple sentences, and concrete language.
- Try to get as much "light and shade" in your voice as possible, use it to emphasise key words and phrases.
- Speak at a normally slow rate. As a rule of thumb, a double-spaced page printed in Arial will take about two minutes to deliver orally. Speaking slowly is particularly important if the audience is composed of speakers of a different language than the one you are presenting in.
- Use transitions to help the listener as you move from point to point.

The biggest question for many: to read or not to read?

- When a speaker writes the entire speech and reads it, the presentation usually does not sound "natural". Thus you may want to choose not to read when the audience is relatively small (e.g. 30-40 people or less)

and you are well-prepared and confident about the topic. You can use index cards to guide you through your presentation by reducing the written copy to key phrases and points. Avoid using your own slides as prompt cards as this often means that you will turn your back to the audience to read them.

- Reading a well-prepared, well-rehearsed text is by no means inferior to “natural” speech. Reading will ensure that you will stay within your allotted time (an absolute must!) and that there will be no distracting “free associations”. As size of the audience and importance of the event increase, even experienced speakers will tend to read their text.

Rehearsal

- Practice your talk for yourself and with your colleagues to make sure it runs smoothly and you have time to include all aspects. Check your presentation for voice, language, and timing. Some phrases look good on paper but are tongue twisters in actual speech. If you run over your allotted time during the rehearsal, shorten your presentation instead of speeding up its delivery.

The actual presentation

- Be thoroughly prepared and familiar with your material and the logistics.
- Do not apologise for the topic of your talk, or your lack of knowledge, or your English. If you lack confidence in yourself, the audience will perceive this and lose confidence in you.
- Make eye contact with members of the audience. Don't talk to the back wall or your notes. Find a few friendly, encouraging faces in different parts of the audience and talk to them.
- Keep to time. The standard length for oral presentations at a conference is 10-15 minutes. You should NEVER exceed the time limit. As a guide, the number of your Power Point slides should correspond to the minutes you have for the presentation.
- Avoid using laser pointers to highlight things on screen if possible. If you have to use them, use very briefly and sparingly as they are very distracting.
- Make short, simple, and specific statements.
- When something is important, say it slowly and loudly. Pause occasionally. Never be afraid to stop speaking for a moment.
- Thank the audience for their attention at the end of your talk.
- If a question & answer period is part of the presentation, try to anticipate possible questions and have answers ready. Prepare some additional backup slides which you could show to illustrate the answer to some expected questions.
- If you don't know an answer to a question from the audience, say so.
- Keep mannerisms at a minimum. Do not try to compensate your nervousness with being overly humorous.
- Always stay courteous and professional, even if you have to face an aggressive audience.
- Above all, be yourself.

Components of a Good Talk

- Interesting
- Speaker is prepared
- Simple, clear, and easy to understand
- Visual aids are easy to read and understand
- Speaker talks to audience
- Ends before or on time
- No excuses