



How to give a good oral presentation: a guide for students

Author: Rachel Dbeis
National Co-ordinator, NSAMR, 2013
Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry

How to give a good oral presentation: a guide for students

Introduction:

There comes a point in every researcher's career where public speaking is a task they must face. The lucky few are those that have a natural skill of persuasion, charisma and ability to connect with the audience. For the rest of us however, public speaking remains an area that provokes fear, anxiety and all the associated physical symptoms that come with those! This guide will highlight some of the basics of giving a good oral presentation, dissecting it into three simple parts: preparation, presentation and feedback.

Preparation:

- Two repetitive actions underpin this phase: preparation and practice!
- First prepare, then practice, then do the same again a few more times!
- Preparing for a presentation is a task that should not be underestimated. It requires a fine balance between what you want to achieve and how you plan to deliver that to your audience. For those that are not sure where to start, writing an initial draft would be useful, with a few bullet points that could include the following:

Plan

- Outlining your plan will be a helpful guide for the rest of the presentation.

Introduction

- An anecdotal story or a thought provoking comment that would grab the audience's attention would fit well at the beginning of your presentation.
- Stating the objective of the presentation and highlighting its importance will help the listeners understand and follow your thoughts.

Body

- Break your argument or case down to clear points if possible
- Remind the audience of the purpose of the presentation
- Engage with the audience if appropriate
- Use examples or storytelling; it helps with retaining information in the listener's memory
- Allow for some Q&A time especially if your topic is rather complex

Conclusion

- Summarise briefly your main points and conclusion



- Thank the audience and offer your acknowledgements

You could now consider what your audience knows or doesn't know about your presentation. Do they have the background knowledge to follow through? If not, can you introduce that within the time frame given? What is their main interest in your topic? Does that meet your personal objective?

As those questions above are answered, the draft changed accordingly and the content of your presentation is coherent, the embellishments can then be added. These can include visual aids, relevant research, appropriate jokes and so on.

As for the practice part, the best audience to initially present to are those that have little interest or knowledge of your chosen topic. If they understand what you are trying to portray then your presentation is on its way to being successful. An added bonus would be the ability to get them interested in your topic, by highlighting why it is of such importance.

Additionally, you could also practice your presentation in front of an expert in the field and benefit from their feedback. Some of the most useful presentations are the ones that tailor for both these two audiences.

Finally, rehearse and time yourself until you are comfortable with the content and the structure of what you have prepared. Summarising your main points on small cards might prove to be useful on the day, if you feel like you need to refresh your memory before or whilst delivering your content.

The Presentation

Be clear

The most successful presentations I've witnessed were the ones that were signposted with a clear initial plan. Giving the audience an overview of the presenter's train of thought is one of the key elements of a good presentation. Following from there, being precise and succinct are equally of high importance; we are wired to pay full attention for about 20 minutes a time. As such, going over this limit more often than not results in the audience missing out a chunk of the information. Additionally, using simple vocabulary has a better chance of delivering the message to your listeners. Key words are also very important, take your time to emphasise those and don't be afraid to pause for short periods of time allowing the audience to take the information in.

Engage with the audience

An oral presentation is not only about what you are saying, but also about how you are saying it. A monotonous voice may cause an undesirable hypnotic effect in the audience, whereas an enthusiastic attitude and delivery may be a better approach. It's important to speak loudly so that everyone can hear you clearly. Varying your voice tone is important especially when beginning a new point or emphasising an old one. It is useful to engage the audience with questions and debates, it also is a creative way to use the time given to you wisely, keeping them involved and maintaining a high level of interest in your topic.

Watch out for body language

Research conducted into the 'crossed arms' gesture has shown that when attending lectures, the group that had their arms folded retained 38% less information than the group that kept their arms unfolded. In fact, tests reveal that the listener that has their arms folded is not only paying less attention to what is being said, but also has negative thoughts about the presenter. More importantly, maintain an open body

language yourself when talking, with your body facing towards the audience. Now if faced with an audience who appears to have a closed off body language, a couple of small tricks might come in handy: Give them something to do or something to hold: a brochure, a book, a sample etc... this will force them to unfold their arms and move into a more open position. Alternatively, you can start with the 'show of hands' game, with questions relevant to your topic! (Although make sure your questions are designed to so that the majority's answer is yes!).

Q&A

Knowing your topic inside out is important here. Admittedly, some topics are more complex than others, and the level of knowledge within the audience might exceed yours. However, the fact that the audience is asking questions is a sign of their interest in your topic! Respond to questions as accurately as you can, but also as briefly as possible. One of the pitfalls of presentations is not the time spent on giving the oral presentation but the unnecessary time used to respond to questions. It is important that the audience gets a clear answer to their question, however it is also important not to lose sight of the purpose of the presentation by going into too much detail. A way around that would be to answer questions succinctly, and suggest that the parties interested in more detail find you later on for a more in depth discussion.

After the presentation: feedback

The most important part in the aftermath of a presentation is to get feedback and note what could have been done better. Two main questions could be asked and answered after you've presented, either verbally or through collecting a filled out feedback form:

- a. What do you think was good about this presentation?
- b. What do you think could be improved on?

Any extra questions or thoughts you wish to note are equally valid, but make sure you focus initially on what went well in your presentation. This will help alleviate any negative feelings you've had about it and will assist in being more confident for future presentations.

A few 'Dos' and 'Don'ts'

- Don't read from a script but be prepared enough not to have to!
- Do smile at the audience, it will help them connect better and open up to you.
- Do have a few visual aids or a small presentation but don't fill those with infinite sentences or endless animations (especially if using Prezi – it has been known to cause nausea!)
- Do enjoy yourself, the audience is more likely to enjoy your presentation if you portray it with enthusiasm! Hopefully you will be presenting something you find interesting and project those feelings unto the audience.
- A bit of humour is always a welcomed addition, and for those of us that aren't very proficient at comedy, a light hearted appropriate personal story may go a long way with the audience.
- Take pointers from people you admire but always be yourself.

