

TIPS FOR PRESENTING

For many people, presenting is a nerve-wracking experience. However, there are a number of actions you can take both before and on the day to help you through.

■ Before the day

The following advice is in regard to **preparations**:

- ▶ **Prepare.** Know your topic (not only your slides...) as much as you're able. This will be a big boost to your self-confidence.
- ▶ **Practice, practice, practice.** There's no such thing as over-preparing for a presentation. The more familiar you are with your material, the more relaxed you'll feel on the day. You shouldn't learn a script word for word, but your presentation should flow, and you should know the order in which your slides will appear. If possible, give a practice run in front of friends or peers. You can even try in front of a mirror or record it. It's definitely worth speaking out loud, even if you only deliver your presentation to a wall!
- ▶ Create a PowerPoint presentation and/or visual aids. More guidance on these can be found by reading "**Tips for creating an effective PowerPoint presentation**" and "**Presentation visual aids**" in this series.
- ▶ If you can, **watch other people's presentations.**
- ▶ If you find you need help remembering what it is you want to say, **prepare notes or cue cards.** If the latter, number them in case you drop them...
- ▶ Prepare and print out any **handouts.**
- ▶ **Brainstorm possible questions** you could be asked.

The following advice is in regard to **practicalities**:

- ▶ If you're using any form of equipment, bear the following in mind:
 - work out any technical elements before the day, i.e., know how it works
 - technology can fail: bring your presentation on a USB stick in case you need to use another laptop
 - even bring a print out of your slides: at least you can hand it out as a hard copy if it comes to that!
 - work offline if you can: have websites, YouTube videos, etc., ready in offline formats
- ▶ Make sure you **know where the room is** that you'll be presenting in, and how long it'll take for you to get there on the day. If you can, visit the venue ahead of the day.
- ▶ Know **what time** you'll be presenting.
- ▶ Don't forget to give your presentation one final **fact, spell and grammar check.**
- ▶ Likewise, **proofread any printed materials** you intend to handout.
- ▶ **Save it in at least two formats**, e.g., USB stick, online drive (just in case).
- ▶ **Get your outfit ready.** Dress appropriately.

- ▶ Make sure you **get a good night's rest**.

■ On the day

- ▶ **Read through your presentation on the day** you're going to give it. Maybe you'll notice one more mistake, or that a hyperlink is now under construction.
- ▶ **Arrive early.** Get used to the environment in which you're going to present.
- ▶ **Test any equipment.**
- ▶ Make sure you're well **fed and watered**.
- ▶ **Turn off your mobile** (or at least make sure it's on silent or flight mode).
- ▶ **Prepare a bottle or glass of water** to take up with you in case your throat gets dry. Avoid very cold drinks: these can make your throat close up.
- ▶ **Have a timer ready.** It's possible to find one on PowerPoint.
- ▶ **Welcome the members of your audience** as they arrive.

■ Presenting effectively

▶ Assert yourself

There are a number of ways in which you can present yourself in a positive and strong manner:

- **Your posture:** this will depend very much on what kind of presentation you're aiming to give. An upright, still posture is appropriate for a formal presentation, for instance. However, don't be tempted to slouch – standing with your shoulders back will help you to breathe and feel more confident.
- **Your presence:** try and have the confidence to fill the space you have in front of your audience. For example, avoid the urge to hide behind a desk.

▶ Connect with your audience

There are a number of ways in which you can connect with your audience:

- **Introduce yourself:** in a university setting this is usually a formality, but it's an effective way to start building a rapport with your audience from the get-go.
- **Smile:** however nervous you are, smile. This will help you and your audience to relax.
- **Eye contact:** this is a normal part of everyday communication with others. If you're presenting to a small audience, try and make eye contact with everybody present. If you're presenting to a larger audience, make sure to scan all areas of the room. Don't eyeball anybody! Shift your gaze frequently. If you do have issues with eye contact, looking at people's foreheads is an effective alternative.
- **Gestures:** as with eye contact, gestures are an everyday part of communication. Use outward gestures that include your audience in what you're saying as well as emphasizing the point you're trying to make. Be animated, but not so much that it's distracting.

- **Language:** include your audience through your language. For example, you can introduce a slide by stating “As we can see from this slide...”. Rhetorical questions are another strategy, for instance “So, what can we take from this?” If you feel comfortable enough (and have enough time) you can include the audience by directing a question at them. This can be a compelling start to a presentation, and also a way in which you can ascertain how much your audience already knows about your topic.

This is also a good place to bring up the use of humor: this can be a great ice-breaker. However, it should only be used if you feel confident enough to do so. Otherwise, it'll just increase any awkwardness already present.

- **Don't turn your back on your audience:** be aware of how the chairs are set up so that you can move yourself accordingly. And don't be tempted to address your slides instead of your listeners.

► Utilize your voice

Your voice can be used in a number of ways to assist you in conveying your messages:

- **Volume:** make sure you're speaking loud enough for your audience to hear you. If you're unsure if they can, ask the people at the back if you're loud enough. If you have friends present, ask them to give you a sign if you're speaking too quietly (or too loudly).
- **Pace:** it can be very easy to start speaking too quickly when you're nervous. If you're a person prone to speeding up, get into the habit of taking a breath after each sentence, or at least before each new slide.
- **Pitch:** most importantly – avoid speaking in a monotone. This will make even the most interesting of talks sound dull. Engage your audience by speaking in a conversational style.
- **Silence:** there's also a lot to be said for *not* using your voice. A pause can be used to emphasize points. It can also be used to take a deep breath.

► Breathe...

Now, this might seem like an obvious point to make! But, especially when you're anxious, your breathing can become fast and shallow, which just exacerbates your anxiety. Before you begin your presentation, take a deep breath or two to help ground yourself. When you start a new slide or before answering a question, take a deep breath. Don't feel conscious about pausing momentarily to breathe: it really will help you to steady your nerves and focus.

► Remember: it's *normal* to feel nervous.

When you're in the throes of anxiety, it can be of little help to know that this is “normal”. But, it is! Many people feel nervous before public speaking. There are many ways to help you to control your nerves. Two have been mentioned here: practicing your presentation, and learning to manage your breathing. Everybody's different, however, so look online for other practical methods to help you with any presentation jitters.

► Stick to your time limit.

Don't go significantly under or over the time limit allotted. On PowerPoint there's an inbuilt timer. Otherwise, bring a timer along, or get a colleague or friend to hold up a five minute warning sign at the back of the room. It's not worth losing marks over a few minutes.

■ Questions and answers

The final questions and answers part is feared by many: you're no longer in control of the content! If you want guidance on how to cope with this section, check out "**Tips for dealing with questions and answers**" in this series.