



# **GIVING A PRESENTATION**

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## INTRODUCTION

What is many students' worst nightmare? It is not usually as sensational as swimming in shark-infested waters; for most, the answer is 'giving a presentation'. This booklet seeks to confront such fears, to give you some techniques for coping with them, and some ideas on how to make that hazy presentation into something concrete and achievable. With so many courses now featuring oral presentation as an assessed component – besides its increased use in selecting candidates for jobs – it is important that you know how to present yourself successfully.



This booklet is divided into three main sections, focusing on each main component of the presentation: the Individual, the Material, and the Audience. It ends with some extra information arising out of sessions on presentations, with some suggested further reading.

## THE INDIVIDUAL (i.e. YOU)

Normally, no one bothers about their demeanor, but when speaking in front of a group of people, it's surprising how normal self-control can desert you. Here are some of the side-effects people report experiencing in this situation: trembling limbs, palpitations, nausea, faintness, shallow breathing, sweaty palms (and elsewhere),

headaches, tension, dry throat, choked voice, panic, butterflies (and worse) in stomach.

Though of small comfort, it is worth noting that most people have suffered some of these symptoms, even professional speakers. However, experienced speakers will have worked through their initial terror. As Bernard Shaw said, he learned to speak in public just as he learned to skate, by falling on his backside many times. What good speakers do is harness their fear, making it work *for* them rather than *against* them.

The following might help you deal with the excess adrenalin swilling about your body - which is what makes you feel so panicky:

- **Deep breathing**, from the abdomen (i.e. without raising your shoulders or expanding your chest). Breathe in through your nose, counting to ten, then breathe out through your mouth, also for ten, saying to yourself as you do so: "I feel calm and relaxed." This is a long term cure, but three or four deep breaths before you start to speak should power your opening words and give you confidence.

- **Release tension from your body**. It is very easy to tense up before you speak, making body movements jerky and unnatural, besides constricting your voice. To get rid of this tension, you first have to be fully aware of it, so try tensing even harder, then consciously letting go. Do this for individual parts of the body. It can be combined with the breathing exercise above, inhaling as you tense, then exhaling as you relax. It is a fact that you cannot be both tense and relaxed at the same time.

- **Physical Exercise.** This is a good general way of getting rid of excess adrenalin, which is why some speakers move about so much. If you feel particularly nervous at the beginning, think of ways that you might open your talk in a more active way; for example, by distributing handouts, or writing on the board. This might just give you enough time to 'find your feet'.

- **Relax neck and shoulders.** The neck area is one key place where tension builds up, stifling your voice. Try raising your shoulders as high as possible, then dropping them (as suggested above); also, try rotating each shoulder several times, both forward and back. Lastly, try rolling your head, both clockwise and anti-clockwise, stretching your neck as you do so (no *Exorcist* manoeuvres, though).

- **Anxiety is far greater for you, on the inside,** than for your audience, who will witness very little of it. So, try to resist the temptation to tell your audience how nervous you are.

- **Debunk threats.** Audiences are generally supportive (especially fellow students, whose own turn will come). If anyone does appear particularly intimidating, an old speakers' trick is to imagine that person in a compromising position (e.g. sitting on the loo); in this light, few people can appear threatening.



skills.

The above are techniques to help you with your nerves, but you can also exercise the main physical resource you need for speaking in public: your voice. With most other skills, you would not expect to be wonderful without preparation, but, for some reason, many expect to give talks without any training at all. Actors, however, will tell you that the ability to avoid mumbling, to project and articulate clearly, are learned

**Voice exercises - try the following.** The first exercise is for consonants, the second for vowel sounds. With each, pronounce the sounds of the respective letters (i.e. 'puh', not 'pee'); say each about ten

times over, getting faster and faster, but without losing the individual sounds.

Consonant exercise: p - f - th - t - s - k - h

Vowel exercise: ee - ih - eh - ah - aw - uh - o - oo

If you find you have problems with particular sounds, you can obviously concentrate on these; for example, the following is particularly good for exercising the mouth on *r* and *l* sounds: 'Red lorry, yellow lorry'.

For more advanced limbering up, try articulating the following (see McKenzie, 1993, for more exercises):

- i) In Tooting, two tutors astute,  
Tried to toot to a Duke on a flute.  
But duets so gruelling  
End only in duelling  
When tutors astute toot the flute!
  
- ii) I've information vegetable, animal or mineral,  
I know the Kings of England and I quote the fights historical,  
From Marathon to Waterloo in order categorical.  
I'm very well acquainted too, with matters mathematical,  
I understand equations, both simple and quadratical,  
About binomial theorem I'm teeming with a lot of news -  
With many cheerful thoughts about the square on the  
hypoteneuse.

(W.S. Gilbert, 'The Major-General's Song' from *The Pirates of Penzance*)

**Non-verbal communication is also important**, but is often best left in its natural state. Those that try to develop their non-verbal skills often look very artificial. This said, you should try to be aware of possible bad habits, which might need correcting. Try observing yourself in front of a mirror, or with a friend, or, failing that, video yourself. Watch out for lack

of eye-contact (the prime fault), slouching, frenetic gestures or complete immobility.

## THE MATERIAL

Even if you are very nervous, the fact that you have some well-prepared material should boost your confidence. The following points should assist you in this.

- 1) **Brainstorm the topic.** To avoid a rather typical, mundane approach to a topic, it is a good idea to try 'brainstorming' it. In this way, you are more likely to come up with a more original approach, or angle. So, put the topic in the centre of a large piece of paper, and write down anything that comes to mind associated with it (see *Note-Taking* booklet for further details). The next stage is to order this mass of material, putting together like with like, and ruthlessly dropping anything that doesn't fit in.
- 2) **Structure the topic.** However much brainstorming you do, none of this messy, early stage should be left visible to your audience. You need a very clear structure to your talk. Work round the old maxim that you

Tell them what you're going to tell them

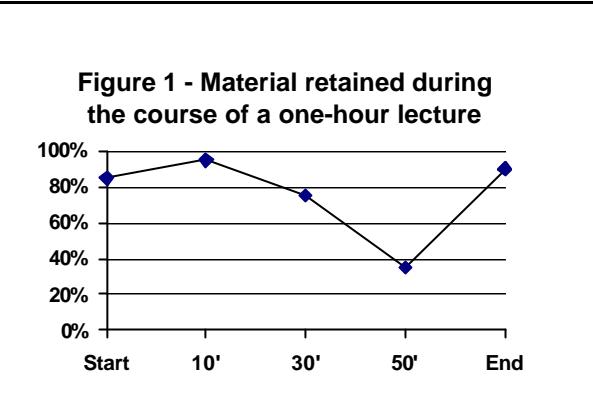
Tell them

Tell them what you've told them.

That is, you have a beginning, a middle and an end. Within this, there should be more explicit, concrete headings (as developed in 3 and 4 below), but try to observe these more general points:

- organise your material round no more than five main points—and preferably no more than three.

- make sure that you deliver your key points at the beginning and end, avoiding the trough that often occurs about three-quarters way through a talk (see figure 1). Good speakers, however, manage to avoid this dip in attention, by involving the audience in some way, or by changing the stimulus (e.g. from voice to visuals).



3) **Make the structure explicit.** It is no good having a well-structured talk unless this organisation is conveyed to the audience. It is a good idea, therefore, as already stated, to tell your audience about this structure at the beginning. It might be even better if your main headings are written up somewhere (e.g. on a board), where you can refer to them as you go through your talk, adding verbal directions; e.g. "That's the end of the first issue. I'd now like to move on to the second question ...".

4) **Choose a format that suits your material.** There are many different ways of organising your material. Hopefully, this should emerge from the first two points above, but you should be aware of some tried and tested formats that might help (from Brown, 1978).

*The Classical.* This is a very traditional method, where the main point is given, then subdivisions, then examples, then qualifications are stated. It is useful where you are talking about a topic that divides into smaller issues, or are trying to talk about relationships between things. Here is an example:

I'm going to talk about statistics. Statistics is concerned with numerical facts, their description, classification, tabulation and analysis. The subject can be divided into two main groups:

*Descriptive* statistics and *Inferential* statistics. We'll begin with a general description of each, then look at them in more detail.

First, descriptive statistics. This is where you present information in numerical form, often to highlight any trends in the data; for example, looking at averages, at norms, at percentages and at how the data is distributed. Let's take each of those in turn....

*The Problem-centred*. With this, the talk begins with the stating of a problem, or issue, and the various aspects are teased out. Then a solution is suggested and its strengths and weaknesses discussed, before moving on to another possible solution. As long as your audience knows where you are going it can be very effective. It works in many social science disciplines, and in history and philosophy. Also, in most talks about projects (e.g. engineering or art and design), where various technical and design problems need to be discussed). For instance:

What is the relation of language to thinking. Do we think in words, or is there something behind the words - some 'pure thought'? There are two main answers to this. First that language and thought are separate processes. Second, that they are the same: that thought only occurs through language.

We'll begin with the idea that they are different. Piaget, for example, argues that thought develops independently, and only later comes to be expressed in language. Before this, children's thinking is closely related to their movements ... However, what about the fact that we subvocalise when we think? that is, there is movement of the vocal chords?...

*The Sequential*. This is also popular in projects, where you are working through an issue in stages. Wherever there is some ordering principle, this is a useful format, whether it be chronological (as in historical accounts) sequential (as in an experiment, the outline of a technique), or

logical (the stages of an explanation or proof, leading to some conclusion).

I want to explain today how yarn is produced from fibres. The first step is for the raw material to be cleaned and prepared ...

*The Thesis.* A powerful format in the right hands. Often used for talks aimed at persuading an audience. It often begins with an assertion, which is then justified by argument and evidence; i.e. statements, implications, deductions. For instance:

I'm going to demonstrate today that there is no such thing as society, only individuals. I shall be drawing on evidence from four main areas - historical, anthropological, biological, and cultural. ...

*The Comparative.* A simple format for comparing or contrasting two things: theories, objects, processes, solutions - whatever. Normally the pros and cons of each would be related, with their attendant strengths and weaknesses.

There are two main theories explaining why people do well or badly at school. The first is biological: that some are brighter than others. The second is cultural: that some people have a better environment and home background. We shall take each of these in turn, and examine the evidence...

## 5) ***Use suitable language.***

- Short words and sentences ("I came. I saw. I conquered.")
- Vivid, concrete language ("I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.")
- Analogies, metaphors ("Religion ... is the opium of the people.")
- Rhetorical questions ("So, how did they overcome this problem? I'll tell you...")

6) **Use audio-visual aids:** overhead-transparencies, video, DVD, CD, computer simulations, on-line presentations, interactive whiteboards, 3-D objects, handouts, and many more. Ask in LS and D for more details.



7) **Rehearse your talk**, with whatever props you are going to use. Do this aloud, in front of a mirror, or friends. You might also try taping it. Time it and amend accordingly. Depending on the context, you might then convert the talk to key words and phrases, putting them on small cards (e.g. 5" x 3").

## THE AUDIENCE

The main difference between a beginner and a practised speaker is that the latter will amend his or her talk in the light of feedback; for instance, by seeking to involve a bored-looking audience, or by simplifying things when an audience looks perplexed. This, however, can only come with practice. But there are some things you can do to optimise your audience's appreciation.

- Prepare the room beforehand – organise the seating, ventilation, lighting, together with your props (e.g. headings on a board, ohp plugged in and focused on screen, water, etc.)
- Stand upright, feet apart, square-on to your audience, and look them in the eye. Smile at them now and again.
- Introduce yourself and explain what you are going to do/say.
- Tell the audience how you want them to behave (e.g. whether to interrupt with any questions, or to save them till the end).
- Leave time and space for questions.



### *Audience Skills*

Many students seem to think that if they are not in the spotlight, giving the talk, then they have no part to play in the proceedings. Clearly, this is not so. As an audience member, you have a responsibility to make the talk go as well as possible. Many talks suffer not because of the speaker, but because of poor audience behaviour. So, here are some skills for the audience:

- Try to look interested, not slouching, arms tightly folded, reading a newspaper, or dozing.
- Listen to the talk. Do not engage in your own conversation with a neighbour. Even small asides and whisperings are very distracting.
- Give appreciative non-verbal feedback (e.g. eye-contact, smiling, nodding).
- Try to ask questions arising out of the talk. Take notes to help you remember.
- Applaud the speaker, and give positive feedback on how much you enjoyed it, before you offer any criticism.

### **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

After students have been told about giving a presentation, two particular questions are frequently asked, which are addressed here. First, what different types of presentation are there, and second, how are presentations assessed?

### **(i) Types of presentation**

It is worth thinking about the different types in terms of a continuum, leading from the more humdrum to the more threatening. Realising that you are already doing some form of oral presentation merely by being a student should help boost your confidence. Also, it may well be that you can use some of the less threatening opportunities to speak in public as a way of preparing for more advanced forms. The following all involve some amount of oral presentation:

- answering a question in class;
- asking a question in a lecture;
- spokesperson/rapporteur in group work;
- speaking in a tutorial/ personal interview;
- chairing a meeting;
- giving an extended oral response to a piece of work (viva, or oral examination);
- presenting an assignment/ project (either alone or as part of a team);
- giving a paper, or seminar presentation.

Seminars are worth considering in more detail, as students often misunderstand the occasion, reading out a written essay and then wondering why silence descends afterwards - often to be filled by a tutor's monologue.

Seminars are defined here as forums for sharing and developing ideas on an issue; they are usually introduced by an individual 'giving a paper', which provides the stimulus for further discussion.

Consequently, it is not a good idea to read a piece of work that was meant to be 'read' rather than heard. Spoken material needs to be far simpler if the audience is to follow it successfully. It is also not a good idea to have a conclusion that ties up all the loose ends - hence the frequent embarrassing silences that can follow a paper. Successful seminars frequently have more provocative presentations, which leave issues 'hanging', for the audience to pick up on. Hence, techniques such as 'playing devil's advocate' or 'coat-tailing' can be successful, in that they allow the audience to become more involved. It can also lessen the pressure on speakers if they know that their personally held ideas are not under direct attack. These can then be saved till the end of the seminar, when their personal response can be given in relation to the views of others.

Note that the word 'attack' was used above. Some writers have drawn attention to the macho posturing in debates, with terms like the following used: indefensible, shot down in flames, change tactics, fresh line of attack, gain ground, demolish, cut and thrust, etc. Arguments in higher education should not be seen as tournaments ('Do you want to argue about it?'), but constructive debates.

In fact, some tutors might suggest that a few ground-rules are established for the conduct of seminars, such as only one person talking at a time.

## **(ii) How are oral presentations assessed?**

Obviously, marking schemes differ across the Institute, depending on the course. However, broadly speaking, the following elements will normally form part of any assessment:

*Preparation* (planning, research, use of notes, etc.)

*Content* (organisation, sequencing, level, accuracy, interest, timing)

*Delivery:*

-*Speech* (appropriate language, clarity, volume, tone, articulation, emphasis, pace)

-*Non-verbal communication* (posture, gesture, facial expression, eye contact, mannerisms)

-*Visual-aids* (if applicable: use of overhead-projector, board work, handouts, etc.)

## Further Reading

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