Chapter 23

How to prepare for an oral presentation

> Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.
>
> Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865)

A presentation provides an opportunity for you to communicate your research findings orally. Research papers and reports are usually presented in seminars, conferences or poster presentations. Such sharing of information provides an opportunity for researchers to receive feedback at crucial junctures in the project. Many people associate presentation with a collection of Microsoft Office PowerPoint slides. This has spawned a number of phrases such as 'Death by PowerPoint', 'PowerPoint hell' and 'PowerPoint poisoning' to describe presentations that used slides poorly. Similar phrases also apply if you are not using other presentation software effectively. The purpose of a presentation is for you to relay a message to the audience. The difference between a good and a bad presentation is determined by the effectiveness of the presenter in getting the message across. Presentation materials are there to help the presenter get his message across and not be the message itself. The relationship between the presenter, presentation material and audience is shown in Figure 23.1.

THE MESSAGE

The message in your presentation is your research findings. All the materials that you need for your presentation can be extracted from your report or thesis. You should not present any material that is not part of your report or thesis. An effective presentation requires careful selection of the materials from the report or thesis. Common mistakes in selecting materials are (1) including too much information, especially including slide after slide of equations that are difficult for the audience to process and understand and (2) including too much of other people's work (literature review) and not enough of your own work.
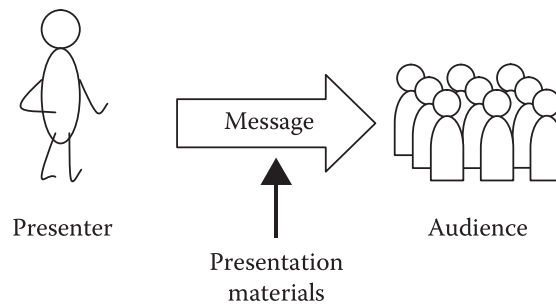
Figure 23.1 Relationship among presenter, presentation materials and audience.

THE AUDIENCE

The audience attending a research presentation is less varied than those attending a general topic presentation. You can expect some of them to be experts in your field, or on your topic. The reason for you making the presentation is to present the key findings and conclusions from your research to the audience. The audience decides the success of your presentation. If you are presenting to defend your report or thesis, the audience 'examines' your work. It is thus important to select presentation materials that meet the expectations of your audience. Avoid presenting materials that are deemed common knowledge in your field.

PRESENTATION TIME

It is important to keep within the allocated time. It is better to use less of the time allotted than to exceed it in a presentation. As a rule of thumb, you should have about one slide per minute of your presentation time. This rule forces you to be more selective of the presentation materials to include as well as avoid having too many slides.

PREPARING FOR AN ORAL PRESENTATION

For an effective presentation, prepare thoroughly using the following four steps:

1. *Plan* the materials that you are going to include in your presentation. You will know what materials that you should include by asking yourself these four questions: (1) Why did I do this work (emphasis on 'this')? (2) How did I do it (what tools, techniques, approaches were used)? (3) What were my findings (results)? (4) What have I concluded from it (what does it all mean)?

2. *Organise*. Arrange the materials in the order that you shall be presenting. Think about the organisation as building a storyboard for your presentation.
3. *Support with visuals*. A figure or image is more attractive than a slide of text, a single equation is better than a slide of equations and less text (point forms) is more effective than more text. The current trend in presentation is to reduce the number of slides to the minimum and keep their design simple. This approach is called 'Presentation Zen' (Reynolds, 2011).
4. *Practise*. All great presenters such as Steve Jobs spend an enormous amount of time practising their presentation. With enough practise, you can present without the need to memorise the content.

PRESENTATION FORMAT

Use the report or thesis framework for your presentation:

- Introduction slides
- Materials and methods slides
- Results and discussion slides
- Conclusions and future research slides
- References cited slides

Introduction slides

- State the problem, the objectives of the study, and brief background information.
- Include the justification and relevance of your study.
- Try to answer the following questions: Why was the study done? What is the existing state of knowledge of this topic? What are the specific objectives?
- Clearly state the research question that you sought to answer.

Materials and Methods slides

- Include a brief description of the procedure you used.

This will include data collection techniques, subjects studied, location of the study and the methods used to record, summarise and analyse the data.

Results and Discussion slides

- Present your most important results.
- Use equations, tables and figures as appropriate.

- Include an interpretation and evaluation of the results.
- Compare results with those from other studies (if appropriate).

Conclusions slides

- Draw conclusions based on your findings.
- Speculate on the broader meanings of the conclusions drawn.
- Identify sources of error and any inadequacies of your study.
- Address any future study that your research suggests (recommendations).

References Cited slides

- List all the references cited in the text—if you did not cite any references, you do not need a *References Cited* slide.
- Cite references in text by author and date.
- All references should be listed in full, alphabetically by first author, in the *References Cited* slides.

PRESENTATION SLIDES

Slides are designed to be visible and to be read by the audience. They should be clear, concise and succinct. Here are some simple rules for slide design:

1. Use large fonts (at least 24 points). The rule of thumb is that the person at the back of the room should be able to read the slide.
2. Choose san-serifs fonts (e.g. Arial, Calibri, Helvetica) over serifs fonts (e.g. Times New Roman, Century, Lucida) unless otherwise stipulated by your institution as research has shown that it is harder to read serifs fonts.
3. Use boldface or underline for emphasis and minimise the use of italics, which is harder to read.
4. Use a dark background with light fonts and graphics, or use a light background with dark fonts and graphics.
5. Do not write complete sentences. Reduce and simplify text by using a bullet list.
6. Include no more than four to five bullet points on a single slide.
7. Make all the bullet points on a single slide relevant to one single specific point.
8. Use a heading for each slide.
9. Avoid long complex sentences—break down into relevant subcomponents, each with a separate bulleted entry.
10. Use active voice.
11. Avoid using all capitals in the text as this comes across as being rude.

12. When using colours on a slide, use no more than three colours. Avoid certain colour combinations such as red–green (difficult to decipher for people with red–green colour blindness), yellow–white or blue–black (difficult to see due to low contrast) and red–blue (can create illusion and causes eye strain and fatigue).
13. When presenting figures and charts, make sure captions and labels are visible.
14. Minimise the use of animations or transitions as they can be distracting. However, animation can be useful for emphasising points and animating flowcharts.
15. Avoid putting too much information on one slide. Use a presentation script, if necessary.

A common mistake made by students, especially those whose first language is not English, is to assume that the slides will be sufficient cues for the oral presentation. However, the anxiety and emotions experienced during the actual presentation may result in a disconnect between the brain and tongue, leading to poor choice of words and disjointed sentences. Preparing a script should be part of the preparation for the presentation. Many public speakers use a prepared script. If you do not see them using a script, it is because they have committed the script to memory after countless rehearsals or they were using a teleprompter. Therefore, prepare a script even if the presentation is only for 10 minutes. Write the script using spoken English and simplify the sentences to make your presentation as effective as possible. Your presentation should sound like a conversation with the audience.

Once you have prepared the script, rehearse, rehearse and rehearse! If you have rehearsed sufficiently, you should be able to do without the script during the presentation. If you need to use the script during the presentation, take only quick glances at it while maintaining sufficient eye contact with the audience.

INTERESTING FACTS

- According to Weissman (2009), in an oral presentation how you present yourself (body language) is the most important (55%) followed by how you deliver the presentation (38%) and lastly the words you used in the presentation (7%).
- The 10/20/30 Powerpoint rule—This rule was devised by Guy Kawasaki, a venture capitalist, author and speaker. The rule is that no presentation should have more than 10 slides, uses less than 20 minutes and font size of at least 30 points. This rule is useful for any presentation lasting less than 20 minutes.

REFERENCES

Reynolds, G. (2011). *Presentation Zen: Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery* (2nd ed.). Berkeley, CA: New Riders.

Weissman, J. (2009). *The Power Presenter: Techniques, Style and Strategy from America's Top Speaking Coach*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.