

Do's and don'ts of oral presentations

To me, presentations are the most powerful device. You can't really name a movement that didn't start with the spoken word.

Nancy Duarte, author, *Slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations*, 2005

After you have written and submitted your report or thesis you are expected to present it orally to your examiners or to a review board. The oral exam allows you to demonstrate your understanding of your research, the related literature and the topic as a whole. It gives your examiners the chance to question you on any areas in your work that are not clear to them, and also evaluate whether the work is your own. The oral exam can thus be stressful especially if this is the first time that you will be presenting your work orally to an audience who are experts in your area of research. It can be even more stressful if English is a second or foreign language for you.

The objective of this chapter is to provide you with practical advice on how to present your work confidently and effectively. Read *Chapter 23 Preparing for a project presentation* for advice on how to prepare the contents of your presentation. This chapter covers the following areas in delivering an oral presentation successfully:

- Managing anxiety
- Delivering your presentation
- Using presentation tools
- Managing your time
- Answering questions

MANAGING ANXIETY

Do:

- *Learn to accept some anxiety.* Even the most experienced speakers feel a little nervous before a presentation; in fact, it is believed that a little anxiety actually makes you a better speaker. Learn to accept that you will always be a little anxious about speaking in public, and that it is normal and common to feel this way.
- *Visualise confidence.* Visualise yourself confidently delivering your speech. Imagine giving the presentation feeling free of anxiety and engaging the audience. Although this may appear unrealistic for you now, visualisation is recognised as a powerful tool for changing the way that we feel. Elite athletes use this strategy to improve performance in competitions and so can speakers to improve their delivery.
- *Practise.* Even great speakers practise their speeches beforehand. Do practise your presentation at least a couple of times before you present it. Practise in an environment that is as similar as possible to where you will be giving your presentation. Practise using your visuals/PowerPoint slides. Practise out loud with a recording device or video camera and then watch yourself to see how you can improve. Or, practise in front of friends or family members and ask for feedback.
- *Memorise the first minute.* Start with your brain on autopilot by knowing the first minute of your presentation by heart and knowing the rest of your presentation very well.
- *Write out the script of your presentation.* Using a complete script will help if you are extremely nervous about presenting. Practise reading it in a natural voice (you do not want to sound like a textbook). During your presentation, refer to your script discreetly when you are speaking. Hold the script at waist level and take only brief glances at it.
- *Visit the venue.* If you have access to the room where you will be speaking, take the time to visit in advance and get used to the layout of the room in which you will be presenting. Check out the audio-visual equipment and make arrangements for any equipment that you will need but is not available. Practise standing where you will deliver your speech. Familiarising yourself with your surroundings will take away the fear of the unknown and help to reduce your anxiety.
- *Concentrate on your key points.* When you focus on the task at hand, anxiety is less likely to get out of control. Concentrate on the main points of your presentation and make it your goal to deliver those key points to your audience.
- *Realise the audience is on your side.* Think about a time when you were a member of an audience and the speaker was noticeably nervous. Did you think negatively of that person? More likely, you felt sympathetic and attempted to reassure the speaker by smiling or

nodding. Remember that in most situations, the audience wants you to succeed.

- *Breathe.* Relax and breathe normally. Do not be afraid to pause and take a deep breath or two before you begin (or during the presentation, if necessary).
- *Manage symptoms of nervousness.* During your presentation, deal with symptoms as they occur:
Dry mouth: sip a little water
Trembling hands: clasp them lightly together
Shaking knees: shift your weight and flex your knees
Quivering voice: pause, take a deep breath or two, and smile to relax

Don't:

- *Rely completely on a written script.* If you are very nervous, it helps to bring along a script of your presentation as a form of security, in case you forget what to say. However, beware that when people are nervous, they tend to just read the script without looking at the audience. This makes you look unprepared as well as unprofessional. Unless you are extremely nervous and need to rely on a written script, put what you need to remember on your slides as brief points. Then use these as prompts to remind you of what you have planned to say. Remember, however, to glance only briefly at your prompts on the screen.
- *Limit practise to just before the oral examination.* Take every opportunity to speak in front of groups and to give presentations throughout your programme of studies. It is only by frequent practise that you will overcome your nervousness about speaking in public.

DELIVERING YOUR PRESENTATION

A presentation comprises both content and delivery. Content has to do with the *what*, that is the information being conveyed. Delivery has to do with the *how*, that is the manner in which the content is conveyed. Delivery has three components: *verbal*, *vocal*, *visual*; these are often referred to as the 3 V's. The *verbal* component relates to the use of words, the *vocal* component to how we use our voice, and the *visual* component to the different aspects of body language.

Verbal component: Use of words

Do:

- *Open and close the presentation in a professional manner.* Treat the beginning and the end of your presentation seriously. The beginning is when you establish rapport with the audience and when you have

its full attention. The end of your presentation is just as important as it leaves a lasting impression.

Open your presentation by greeting your audience, introducing yourself, showing your title slide, and looking directly at the audience.

Say: *Good morning/afternoon. I am (your name). I'm going to present my project/research on ...* Then move smoothly on to the next slide.

Close your presentation by projecting your *Conclusions* slide. Run through the points on the slide very briefly. Then nod your head and thank your audience.

- *Use spoken English style, not written.* Speak in the style of a relaxed but serious conversation. You should give the impression that you are speaking to the audience, rather than sounding as though you are reading your report or thesis.
- *Speak in the active voice.* Unless you have a reason to use the passive voice, speak in the active voice as this is more natural in spoken English. For example, instead of saying *A correlation was found between ...* (passive voice), say *We found a correlation between ...* (active voice).
- Use the correct technical terms.
- *Use simple and concise words.* Avoid unnecessarily unfamiliar or complicated words. For example, say *read* rather than *peruse*; *help* rather than *facilitate*; *explain* rather than *elucidate*.
- *Keep sentences short and concise.* Avoid long and convoluted sentences. Pause at the end of sentences.
- *Give verbal signals.* Use expressions to highlight, emphasise important information or indicate relationships between ideas such as: *This was an interesting result as ...; This was unexpected because ...; This was, in fact, higher than ... and so on.* Verbal signals also include transitions which indicate the beginning of a new point, examples of which are *Firstly, ...; Following from ...; Moving on ...*

Don't:

- *Use slang or informal language.* In a formal presentation, avoid words such as *like, OK, right, things, stuff, hassle* and so on.
- *Memorise your paper* and deliver it verbatim. You may want to memorise the introduction and conclusion so that you start and end on a strong note, but your goal is to sound natural. Reading sentences does not sound spontaneous and engaging.
- *Read your PowerPoint slides.* Reading your slides to the audience is not only redundant but makes your presentation extremely boring. Elaborate and discuss rather than read what is on the slide. You need to make eye contact with your audience and you cannot do that if you are reading the slides.

- *Read sub-headings.* A common mistake pointed out by Silyn-Roberts (2013, p. 243) is to read sub-headings on the slides, for example:
Research objectives. Research objectives were ...
Sampling methods. Three sampling methods were ...
Avoid reading sub-headings as it gives the impression that you are reading from a script or that you are insufficiently prepared.

Vocal component: Use of our voice

Do:

- *Rehearse your presentation using an audio or video recorder.* Listen to the recording and note the tone, pitch and speed of your voice. Work on sounding natural and relaxed.
- *Pronounce your words correctly and clearly.* If you are unsure how a word is pronounced, check the pronunciation before the presentation. Ask a fluent speaker of English for help or use an online dictionary, for example www.dictionary.com or www.howjsay.com. Mispronouncing key words in your field may give the audience a negative impression of you and affect your credibility.
- *Articulate your words clearly.* Do not drop syllables (saying *techlogy* instead of *technology*), swallow your words or garble them.
- *Minimise using fillers.* Fillers are vocal distractors (*um, ah, er*) or verbal distractors which are repetition of the same word (*ok, right, actually, basically, you know etc.*). There is nothing wrong with remaining silent while you think of what to say.
- *Vary the tone of your voice to keep your audience's attention.* It is difficult to pay attention when the presenter is speaking in a monotonous voice. Make your voice interesting by varying volume, rate of speech or pitch.
- *Express enthusiasm for your subject.* Enthusiasm is an essential element in any successful speaker's delivery. To speak enthusiastically, you need to *feel* that you have something important to say and that what you have to say is significant for your audience. Enthusiasm also requires an investment of *energy*. You need to invest more energy than when you are engaging in daily conversation.
Note: Watch a video of Steve Jobs giving a presentation for an example of an enthusiastic delivery: www.youtube.com/watch?hl=en-GB&gl=SG&v=2-ntLGOyHw4.
- *Emphasise key words in your presentation to heighten the impact of your message.* Before the presentation, identify 10–20 words in your presentation to emphasise. Techniques for emphasis include saying the word by changing the volume (speaking the word louder or softer), by raising the pitch (saying the word in a higher pitch) or by saying the word a little longer (stretching out the word, e.g. *en-vi-ron-ment*).

- *Pause at the end of sentences.* Pauses give your audience time to absorb information. Pause before important information to maximise its impact.

Don't:

- *Speak too quickly.* Too rapid speed makes it difficult for your audience to process a lot of new information.
- *Speak in a monotone or mumble.*

Visual component: Body language**Do:**

- *Rehearse your presentation using a video recorder.* Watch the video recording and note body language and facial expression. Work on appearing confident and relaxed.
- *Dress appropriately for the presentation.* Your personal appearance affects your credibility. Casual clothing such as jeans and T-shirts are not appropriate for a formal presentation.
- *Make eye contact with members of the audience.* Sustain eye contact with different members of the audience for 4–5 seconds to appear confident and interested.

Don't:

- *Slouch or lean to one side.* Stand straight and distribute your weight evenly on both legs.
- *Sway or rock in place.*
- *Fidget.* Examples of fidgeting are fiddling with a pen, clicking a pen or tapping a foot.
- *Pace back and forth aimlessly.* Moving about excessively is distracting to the audience. Make your movements purposeful.

USING PRESENTATION TOOLS

- *Note cards.* Write in large, boldface letters if you are using note cards or regular paper for your notes so that you can read your notes quickly and easily. To engage your audience, you should look up from your note cards or paper several times during the presentation.
- *Interaction with the screen.* Be aware of the audience and do not block their view. Do not look at the screen too much. The ratio should be 30:70—look at the screen 30% of the time and at the audience 70% of the time. Point out important features in the figures, graphs

and other visual aids to the audience. Your audience should not be expected to navigate their own way through a complex diagram.

- *Using a laser pointer.* If you are using a laser pointer, make sure you do not continuously and aimlessly circle it on the screen. Locate the word or a particular point in a visual you want to highlight and keep the pointer firmly in the right place for 1 or 2 seconds.

MANAGING YOUR TIME

People often run out of time when giving a presentation and then rush to complete it. The following are the most common reasons for running out of time and tips for avoiding this as suggested by Silyn-Roberts (2013).

Don'ts:

1. *Spend too long on the introductory material.* Your audience is primarily interested in hearing about your results and conclusions. So do not go into great detail about other people's work. Give just enough background information for the audience to understand the context and motivation of your research.
2. *Explain some slides more than you planned to.* It is very easy for unplanned material to come into your mind in the stress of the moment. Resist this by planning the points you need to make for each slide, and forcing yourself to stick to them.
3. *Practise your presentation too fast.* When practising or rehearsing your presentation, remember to speak it out loud. If you merely read your presentation or whisper it, you go faster than you would when you speak it.

PROCEDURE FOR FINISHING QUICKLY

If you do run out of time and need to finish quickly, Silyn-Roberts (2013) advised that you follow the steps below to help you deliver the main points of your presentation to your audience without rushing and in a professional manner (Silyn-Roberts, 2013, p. 247):

- Step 1:* When you realise that time is running out, do not panic. Stay calm and avoid apologising or saying anything to draw attention to the situation. Finish the sentence you are saying smoothly and go directly to your *Conclusions* slide.
- Step 2:* When the *Conclusions* slide is displayed, make a brief comment such as, 'I'm afraid I don't have the time to go through all of my material. However, the conclusions from this project/research are ...' Then run through the conclusions briefly.

If the time left is really very short, show the *Conclusions* slide for the audience to read and then close the presentation by thanking the audience.

TIP: HOW TO FIND YOUR CONCLUSIONS SLIDE INSTANTLY

If you are using PowerPoint, note down the number of the *Conclusions* slide before the presentation. When you need to show the slide, just type the number and hit the *Enter* key.

ANSWERING QUESTIONS

Many students are nervous at the thought of answering questions at the end of a presentation because they fear not knowing the answer to the questions. Students for whom English is a foreign language may also fear not understanding the questions they are asked.

The following suggestions given by Zwickel and Pfeiffer (2006) to help you respond to questions effectively:

1. *Work out possible questions beforehand.* Discuss with your supervisor or someone familiar with your work the questions that are likely to be asked. Anticipate questions on weak or problematical areas and work out how to answer them.
2. *Make sure you understand the question correctly.* Do not answer a question until you are sure you have understood it. Ask for clarification if necessary. You could say, for example: *I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand that. Could you repeat it, please?*
3. *Repeat the question if you think the audience may not have heard it.* Say: The question was *What is the most likely cause of ...?*, and then answer it.
4. *Prepare a supplementary set of slides.* These slides can be more detailed than those in your main presentation. Show them if you are asked a question that requires more detail than provided in the main presentation.

Don't:

1. *Pretend if you do not know the answer to a question.* An expert audience can easily see when someone is unable to answer a question and attempts to cover this up. It is better to be honest by either saying that you do not know (in a positive voice), for example, *I'm afraid I don't know the answer to that question*, or offer to find out the answer, for example, *I don't have the answer to that question at the moment, but*

I'll find out for you by... Besides indicating honesty, such responses also show openness to communicating about your work and your confidence in it.

2. *Interrupt people when they have not completed asking their questions.* Besides being rude, the question may be misunderstood. It is a good idea to wait 1 or 2 seconds after the question has been asked before answering it. This allows you to process the question properly and time to frame an appropriate response.
3. *Be negative about your work.* Do not be afraid to mention briefly and objectively difficulties you may have encountered in your research. It is a sign of honesty, not of weakness. The audience will be able to relate to it and someone may be able to advise you. However, do not be overly critical or self-pitying.

CHECKLIST FOR A PRESENTATION

Delivering your presentation

- Is the volume of your voice sufficient?
- Is your rate of speech appropriate?
- Do you sound enthusiastic about your work?
- Are your words correctly and clearly pronounced?
- Do you make sufficient eye contact with the audience?
- Are you standing straight and confidently?
- Are your gestures appropriate and natural?

Answering questions

- Have you worked out beforehand the possible questions?
- Do you know how to deal with questions you do not understand?
- Do you know what to say when you do not know the answer to a question?

INTERESTING FACTS

The greatest fear

According to U.S. surveys, the fear of public speaking ranks higher in most people's minds than fear of spiders, snakes, illness, heights and even death itself. Even professionals suffer at times from speech anxiety. Sir Lawrence Olivier, a famous British actor, suffered from extreme stage fright.

The longest, shortest and the speech that killed

William Henry Harrison, the ninth U.S. president, is credited for giving the longest speech at an inaugural ceremony. The speech comprising 8,445 words was given in cold and wet weather and resulted in him catching pneumonia, which killed him a month later. George Washington, the first U.S. president, on the other hand, gave an inaugural speech that was just 135 words long. The record for the longest speech was set in 1828 by the House of Commons (the lower house of Parliament in the United Kingdom), and still stands. It lasted 6 hours.

Commercial impact

Three out of every four people, amounting to 75% of the population, suffer from fear of public speaking. Not surprisingly, self-help books offering advice on speaking in public are the best-selling self-help books.

(Extracted from Public Speaking Success, n.d.)

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