

Guide to Presentations

Preparation:

The first thing you must do when preparing to give a talk is to decide what you want to say. Ask yourself what your argument (if any) will be, what are your goals for the talk (and how will you accomplish them), as well as why your audience will care about your talk and what you hope them to take away from it. At this point, you may need to do some research about your audience. What do they know about your topic? What do they need to know? How can the results of your research help them achieve a definable goal?

After you have settled on the goals you hope to accomplish with your talk and identified the needs of your audience, you need to decide the best way to present your argument. What type of technology will you use and how? Try to avoid presenting a series of bullet points or other template-based presentations. Rather, use your slideware to present high-quality graphics or videos, to reinforce main points, or illustrate difficult concepts. Consider your content when choosing your means of presentation: if you are presenting dense technical information that requires strong documentation and special typographic or other requirements, choose a mode of presentation, such as a handout, that can represent this information clearly and accurately. When possible, try to keep this handout to a single sheet of paper. If you have a lot of data, print it on a piece of 11 × 17 paper folded in half as a booklet.

Even if you don't have complicated charts and graphics to present, it's a good idea to include a handout that includes your name and contact information, summarizes your talk, and includes information on sources or additional supporting material. Providing multiple media to your audience (your voice + projected images + a handout) shows a faith in them and their ability to find and absorb your talk's key points at their own pace. Additionally, a handout gives your audience a tangible reminder of your talk that they can revisit later. Never—I mean *never* (seriously: never, ever ever)—print out a deck of PowerPoint slides covered in bullet points and give it to your audience as a handout. All you are doing is giving them something to recycle.

When preparing what you will say during your talk, be sure to keep in mind that your audience will be listening to, not reading, your talk. Be sure to provide orienting information and clearly speak information that otherwise would be conveyed typographically. Repeat main ideas (“in other words ...,” “to summarize ...”), include clear transitions between major points (“... which concludes point 2. Now, point 3 ...”), and indicate when you are referencing source material, particularly direct quotations (“according to source X ...,” “as source Y says, and I quote, ...”).

Once you have chosen your mode of presentation and what you want to say, conduct a full dress-rehearsal of your talk. Dress as you would on the day of the talk and include all of your slides and other presentation materials. Try to complete the entire talk from beginning to end without a break. Have a friend (or member of your group) time the talk and take notes about rough points and other problems. Ask these viewers to pay attention to your body language and hand movements in addition to what you say and your presentation materials. Practice moving around the presentation space. If you don't feel comfortable or don't know what to do with your hands, consider choreographing some simple hand movements and other gestures to help you emphasize main points. If you are in a small room, don't make grand gestures. If you are in a large room, don't make gestures so small that audience members in the back of the room can't see them. If necessary, do several practice talks, implementing changes as needed and cutting material if you find you are going over your allotted time.

Delivering the presentation:

Don't freak out. If you are nervous, take a series of deep breaths to help calm yourself (inhale your nose

for three seconds, hold your breath for three seconds, then exhale through your mouth for three seconds; repeat as necessary). Remember; a little nervousness is good. Channel your nervous energy and adrenaline into your talk so you come across as a dynamic and engaged speaker.

Make eye contact with your audience. If you have a hard time doing this, focus on a point slightly above the head of your audience members; they will perceive this as eye contact. Stand up straight. Don't engage in nervous habits like drumming your fingers on the podium or fiddling with a pen or your notes. If you have room to move around, do so, but deliberately. Don't make jerky movements or pace and avoid making movements that appear frantic or agitated.

If you are part of a group presentation, when you are not presenting yourself, make a point to focus on the member of your group who is presenting. If you are on a stage or otherwise visible to the audience, don't engage in behaviors like scanning the room, reading non-related materials, prepping for your own presentation, or playing with a cellphone or laptop. Keep your eyes on the current presenter; take notes if it will help hold your attention.

Finally, and importantly, be respectful of your audience's time. Don't go over the time allotted to you. If there will be a question and answer session following your talk, be sure to leave plenty of time for it. Otherwise, try to finish 10–15% earlier than your maximum allotted time. This will force you to be concise and make your talk more heavily concentrated with information. Don't ever attempt to fill time or include distracting or useless information. Your audience will appreciate your respect of their schedules.