

Academic Presentations

A presentation is any situation which involves speaking to a group of people in order to make a point, educate or share information. Many presentations also have some form of supporting visual aid such as slides, a whiteboard, projections or flip charts.

THIS handout looks at the key points involved in putting together an academic presentation. It highlights stylistic and structural requirements, the act of presenting and offers advice to improve individual performance. For information on dealing with issues specific to group presentations please refer to our additional handout: **How to Manage a Group Presentation.**

Academic presentations take the same form, but the purpose can be very different. Specifically, academic presentations represent an **oral examination.**

Therefore, when assessing your performance your lecturer will be looking for:

- Understanding of the topic and the audience
- Appropriate breadth and depth
- An argument in the content
- A clear structure: a distinct beginning, middle and end
- Suitable visual aids
- Evidence of having practised the talk
- Proper timing/length

As with all academic skills, academic presentation skills can be learnt and continually improved through practise.

One way of tackling a presentation is to divide it into three easy stages:

1 Planning

2 Preparing

3 Presenting

Each stage should inform the other to ensure an ordered, appropriate presentation, offered in a confident manner.

1 Planning

Thorough planning will enable you to present your views in a considerate and logical way. Three key factors should be addressed when planning your presentation:

- **Purpose**
- **Audience**
- **Location**

Purpose of the presentation

Focus: When you plan your presentation, concentrate on what's really important. What is the exact problem? What is it you need to achieve by the end of it? Set these down as objectives.

Objective(s): Establish your objectives and how you are going to achieve them. All your emphasis should be placed on these objectives throughout the presentation, and influence every aspect of the presentation.

To determine your objectives, decide what you feel your audience must know, think or do at the end of your presentation. Perhaps finishing the statement below will help you focus:

As a result of my presentation, my audience will...

Simplify: Support your main idea with a few examples, and their relevance to the overall aim.

Organise: Structure your overall presentation from the following outline:

- State the main issue
- Develop your viewpoint with specifics
- End with a clear summary and/or a last statement or request
- Handle any questions

Dramatise: Don't just tell it, show it. Find a vivid, memorable way to get your point across. Use visual aids such as graphs, handouts, charts, and/or media.

Humanise: Remember you are speaking to people, try to project outward, not inward, by thinking of ways that will engage your audience.

Audience

The type of audience might well influence the format of your presentation and its content, for example, a technical presentation to a specialist audience might be more formal than one to a discussion group. Ask yourself the following questions about your intended audience:

- Who are they?
- What are their reasons for attending?

- How many are likely to be present?
- What sort of people – age, education, status?
- What do they already know about the subject?
- What are their likely attitudes/biases?

The answers to these questions will affect both the style and the content of your talk.

Location

Another important aspect of planning concerns the location. This can have significant implications for how you plan your content and organise yourself. If you have access to the venue, it might help to pay an early visit. The aspects you might want to check include:

- type and size of room
- seating arrangements – fixed or movable
- position of speaker (you)
- equipment available, e.g. whiteboard, projector, OHP, flip chart, tape recorder
- acoustics (sound)
- facilities for special needs

Don't forget, your plan should help you tailor your information to your audience, to decide what degree of specialist knowledge is required, the order in which you present it and what might affect how you can deliver your presentation. The next stage, *preparing*, is the time you organise and make your content come to life.

2 Preparing

RULE 1: Content is the most important part of your presentation.

RULE 2: The visuals should enhance not detract from your presentation.

A clear structure will allow the audience to understand your main themes. To aid this, break your presentation down into three sections: Introduction, Main Body and Conclusion.

The order whilst presenting:

1. Introduction	2. Main Body	3. Conclusion
Set the scene, outline your objectives	Explain your main findings	Summarise each point made
Tell them what you are going to tell them	Tell them	Tell them what you just told them

Consider working in a 3 – 1 – 2 order when preparing your presentation:

3. Conclusion	1. Introduction	2. Main Body
Work backwards from your overall conclusions to ensure all concluding statements are supported throughout the presentation.	Prime your audience for what's to come and mention the key areas that you will be developing throughout the presentation.	Expand each of your key points in order that the concluding statements are justified.

Conclusion

The conclusion is as equally important as the introduction and should not be rushed. Common pitfalls are running out of time, speeding up, mumbling and fading off, or ending abruptly. If the ending is weak it will affect what the audience think of the overall presentation. Prepare an ending (or end slide) that:

- Sums up the whole presentation
- Does not wander around the subject
- Does not introduce any new ideas
- Does not keep repeating points over and over again

Introduction

Your introduction will need to create an immediate impression and gain the attention of the audience. Therefore, it is very important to be clear about what message you are trying to relay from the outset. You will need to outline enough information for the audience to understand the context of the subject; break down any key terms or concepts that you will be discussing; and outline the sequence of

your material. Generally, you need to identify up to three objectives and these need to be stated early in the presentation so that your audience can follow the development of your argument/discussion.

Right from the start! - Why not ask your audience what they already know about your topic and use this as link to your starting point? This way you will be tapping into the prior knowledge of the audience and you will be giving them a sense of involvement from the outset.

Main body

The middle part of your presentation is where the bulk of your research is relayed.

The quality of the research is critical - The topic should be thoroughly researched, with a number of different sources. Make sure visual images are appropriate to the point(s) you wish to make, and be sure that you know the specifics on each image.

Organisation and transitions make or break a presentation - There should be a logical flow from beginning to end, like in written work. Avoid jumping from one point to another, and be careful about adding information that is not directly related to the main theme. Creating an outline before you begin creating actual slides can be helpful.

Visual aids - Visual aids will help to illustrate your presentation, but effective use of visual aids requires planning and preparation; you need to be selective so as not to overwhelm your audience. Visual aids should enhance your spoken message and if used appropriately can be very effective. Pictures, drawings, and photographs have the potential to make an audience *feel* the way you do. Verbal material, including models, diagrams, and copies of statistics help your audience *think* the way you do. Therefore

- Do not use overcomplicated visual aids – they can confuse the audience, and might add to your nervousness if you have to do and say a number of things at the same time.
- Visual aids should help the audience recall a concept.
- Visual aids must complement what you say.
- Do not have a visual aid that you don't need.
- Avoid too much material in too little time.
- If you are using visual aids such as OHPs, models, video, DVD, props and so on, familiarise yourself with how they work, and where they will be positioned in connection to you as the speaker.
- Edit and proofread all visual or written material – Make sure there are no spelling mistakes and spell authors' names correctly.

For PowerPoint slides:

- Check your timing. On average, use three slides per minute as a maximum.
- Use text sparingly. If your audience is concentrating on written text, they are less likely to give you their complete attention. **THINK BULLETS!**
- The “joy of six” is a helpful rule of thumb. Use a maximum of six points per slide and six words per point.
- Depending on the colour and font size you select, text may be difficult to read. Font size is important - **use the "floor test" for readability**. Print out a slide containing text, and place the page on the floor. Can you read the slide from a standing position? If yes, then your audience can likely read it from their seats. If no, then the font size needs to be increased. If possible, preview your presentation in the room you will be using or one that is similar. Be sure to check the view from the rear of the room.
- Select colours with care. Lighting and distance will affect colour choice. Experiment with colour combinations, but make sure they work well on a screen. Often there is a difference between how something looks on your computer screen and how it appears when projected onto a screen or wall. Make every effort to preview your presentation ahead of time.
- Visual images (from the internet or CLIPART) can be great, but they need to be carefully selected and be appropriate to the point(s) being made. **DO NOT** use images just for the sake of using an image. Check the size of images to make sure they are not distracting, and certainly that they are not distorted.
- Use one design style for the entire presentation. Using one, or several, of the master slides provided in PowerPoint can help ensure this is not a problem.
- Minimize or avoid animated texts, sounds, and fancy transitions. These can be effective in certain situations, but most are not appropriate to academic presentations as often distract your audience from the main points you are trying to make.
- Avoid switching between programs (such as calling up a Web page). This takes extra time and can make it difficult for your audience to remain focused on your presentation.
- Consider whether you want people to take notes during your presentation? If yes, then allow some time to do so. It is also helpful to print a notes page so that notes may be recorded alongside the related slide.

If you are unsure about developing a presentation using Microsoft PowerPoint, please ask a member of staff. We do have a guide that you can work through, either with tutor support or on your own, and from this you will have a presentation that you can adapt for future use.

Question and answer session - This part of the presentation is as important as the rest of the session.

- **Prepare for questions** - Anticipate questions and be prepared to respond to them – not just with more information but with real and relevant examples.
- Do not rush your answer(s)

- Repeat questions, or ask for the question to be repeated, if you need time to think of the appropriate response.
- If you have no idea how to answer a particular question, it would be better to state this clearly and ask to move on to another question. You might also try *“This wasn’t something that I looked at ... but I could find the information and get back to you if you want to speak to me after the presentation or leave your contact details”*.
- If a question has been asked that is outside the scope of your objectives, you might say *“I did not cover that area”* or *“For this presentation, I had to relate X to Y, but if you feel Z is an area I need to look at, I will do so in the future”*.

3 Presenting

Academic presentations are not always in formal settings; sometimes they take place in classrooms in front of small groups of fellow students. Whatever the situation, they should be viewed as an important opportunity to sell your knowledge in a professional way.

The delivery

As a presenter, consider the following practical issues:

- Do not simply read the text from the slides without any of your own words. Remember the audience can read!
- Consider whether sitting or standing is most appropriate – standing is preferable, but for group presentations, sometimes non-speakers may prefer to sit, whilst only the lead speaker stands.
- Don't fold your arms or put your hands in your pocket
- Use cue cards as memory aids. Try to keep them small so that they can be held in one hand, and not read like a script. The audience does not want to see the top of your head for the whole of the presentation.
- Do not fumble with the equipment or furniture
- Always have a duplicate of your presentation or a spare copy with you in the event of unplanned problems – for example, equipment that does not work, saving devices show errors, a sudden change of venue.

With regard to preferred personal qualities:

- Open body language – hands at your side or bent at the elbow in front of your body.
- Look at the audience – don't fix your stare, but glance around in a casual manner.
- Smile
- Clear, even tone of voice – neither hushed nor too loud for the size of the room, or how many people are present. A low tone is preferable for small numbers; greater projection is required for greater numbers, in larger rooms.
- Try to avoid using too many gestures or repetition of certain words or phrases e.g. 'you know', 'and so on and so forth' 'and I really mean this' 'umm' 'err'
- Be enthusiastic but do not get **too** excited about what you are saying and start going off the subject. Bullet points can help you, and the audience, stay focussed and avoid a verbal assault.

Nerves

Remember you are not alone, even the most practised presenter will suffer from nervousness. The following suggestions can help to relieve feelings of anxiety:

- **Try some relaxation exercises.** Sit up, breathe in for a count of one and out for a count of four; keep this going for five minutes whilst just concentrating on the counting and rhythm of your breathing

- **Practise your presentation a few times before the actual event.** Repetition will help you remember actions, timings and crucial sections more easily than passively reading the content on paper or a screen.
- **Mentally rehearse if you are unable to physically rehearse.** Visualise yourself speaking, your body language, what you have to do when; Try to picture the sequence of the presentation to get an idea of the flow of the material, and how you can help the audience understand the most important points. Know your subject!
- Before you get to the presentation **do not cram at the last moment.** Try to do something enjoyable and unrelated to the upcoming event.

References and further reading:

Adapted from:

Harris Rollins, D. *Powerpoint made perfect*. Available at:

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Saunders, D. (2004) *Making presentations: a guide for students*. Centre for Lifelong Learning: University of Glamorgan.