

Delivering an effective presentation

An effective presenter needs to be flexible, energetic and enthusiastic. This guide will help you turn your written presentation into an imaginative public performance.

Other useful guides from Learning Development: *Planning an effective presentation, Using visual aids.*

Presentation as performance

Making a presentation puts you on public display. An audience not only listens to your ideas, it also responds to the way you use your voice and your body. You need more than a well written presentation to make an impact. You will also need to deliver it in a lively, flexible and interesting way. In this leaflet we suggest many ideas for invoking energy in your presentation style.

To begin with, imagine that you are in the audience for your presentation. What might:

- grab your attention?
- stimulate your imagination?
- inspire your confidence?
- develop your understanding?

Now think about ways to encourage these things.

Six steps to becoming an effective presenter

1. Practise

The more familiar you are with your material the more you will be able to inspire your audience's trust and confidence. Do more than practise reading through your material to yourself. If possible, stand up in a room and deliver your presentation to the walls. Get used to hearing your own voice filling a room. Familiarise yourself with the words and phrases in your presentation. Play around with different volumes and see how well you can hear your own voice. Above all, familiarise yourself with the main thrust of your argument and explore how the individual elements of your presentation piece together. This will help you to keep to your chosen objectives and avoid distractions when it comes to your actual delivery.

To read or to learn?

Should you read out your presentation from detailed notes or present it completely from memory? Find a way to compromise between these two approaches. There are dangers in each.

Reading

Reading tends to focus your thoughts on your notes, thus losing contact with your audience. Reading can also reduce your voice to a monotone, removing energy and enthusiasm from your delivery. Directly addressing your audience is much more engaging.

Learning

Learning is fine until you lose your way; for example, a member of the audience asks a question or your overhead projector bulb blows. Always have some form of notes to keep you on the right track. Also, if you

over learn your notes you might lose a sense of energy and enthusiasm. Always work for a sense of confident spontaneity.

Find a way of making notes to support your presentation style. The most common form of note making is to use index cards. These can be read at a glance. Use them as visual prompts to guide you through your presentation. Use one card for each main idea, including details of the supporting information for each point. Connect your cards together with a tag or a piece of string so that they can't get out of order.

2. Assert yourself

An effective presenter needs to be assertive, not aggressive. There are two important Ps.

Posture

It is important to appear confident at all times. Different postures create different moods. A very formal, upright and still posture will create a very different atmosphere from a relaxed and active one. Remember to match your physical behaviour to the objectives underpinning your presentation. If you want to be either formal or informal, make deliberate choices about your physical style and stick to these.

Presence

Have the confidence to fill your space in front of an audience. Avoid apologising for your presence by saying "sorry" (although you must be polite if circumstances so demand – e.g. the session is running over time, or the microphone has stopped working). Also, avoid physical apologies by hiding behind a desk or lectern. You must be confident that the audience wants to listen and that you have something interesting to tell them. Don't be afraid to wait for an audience to settle down before you start speaking or to ask for quiet if this does not happen.

3. Make contact with your audience

One of the key challenges faced by the presenter is to establish links with her/his audience (a poor presenter appears to be speaking to an empty room). Making contact helps to maintain an audience's interest and encourages them to believe that you are genuinely interested in talking to them. You can make contact with your audience in a number of ways, including:

- eye contact;
- gestures;
- spoken contact;
- your use of language.

Eye contact

Eye contact is part of everyday communication and an audience can feel uncomfortable if they are denied it. Making eye contact with individuals gives them a sense of involvement in your presentation and helps to convey your objectives on a personal level. Make sure that you share eye contact with all members of a small audience and all areas of a large audience. Regularly shift your focus around the room, not so that you look nervous, but to help involve as many people as possible in your talk.

A handy tip: if you can't make eye contact in a large group, don't look at the floor or ceiling (this looks like boredom or rudeness). Try looking at people's foreheads. The people sat around them will read this as eye contact even if the individual won't.

Gesture

People use their arms and hands in every day conversation to add emphasis or to help describe events. Presenters will therefore look rather awkward if they keep their hands in their pockets or rooted firmly at their sides. Use gestures to welcome your audience, to add emphasis to your main points or to indicate an ending. Try to use open gestures which move away from your body, extending them out to your audience. This helps to break any audience/presenter divisions. Make sure that all gestures are controlled and precise; too much movement will appear nervous and unfocussed. Always watch against distracting your audience from the content of your presentation. You should continually be trying to find ways to help them listen and understand.

Spoken contact

Acknowledge your audience by making verbal contact with them. At the beginning of your talk ask if they can see and hear you, or check that lighting and sound levels on audio-visual equipment are satisfactory. During your presentation, ask rhetorical questions that you can then answer (e.g. “How do we know this was true?” or “So, what does this prove?”). At the end of your talk give the audience an opportunity to ask questions or to clarify detail—this encourages them to take ownership of your material.

The use of questions is an important tool. Questions involve your audience’s mind in a more stimulating way than simply asking them to sit and listen to your talk. Draw an audience in with clear, focused questions.

Language

Your use of language is particularly important in developing and sustaining a relationship with your audience. Try using language that involves your audience. For example, asking questions such as “What can we learn from this?” or “How did we arrive at this conclusion?” involves your audience in an exploratory process or discussion. When looking at visual aids, introduce them by saying “If we look at this slide we can see that ..” or “This slide shows us that...”. Use language that is welcoming and involving throughout your presentation.

4. Use your voice

Your voice is a very flexible and effective tool. You can use it in many different ways by varying the:

- volume
- pace
- pitch.

Volume

Make sure that your voice is loud enough for your audience to hear clearly. Speaking too loudly or too quietly can make it difficult for your audience to follow your presentation. Listen to people speaking in normal conversation. They tend to raise or lower their volume for emphasis. For example, they may speak loudly when giving an instruction but softly when apologising. To add energy to your presentation, use these colourful changes to your best advantage: a conspiratorial whisper can draw an audience in; a loudly spoken exclamation can make them sit up and listen.

Pace

Make sure that the speed of your delivery is easy to follow. If you speak too quickly or too slowly your audience will have difficulty following your talk. To add life to your presentation, try changing the pace of your delivery. A slightly faster section might convey enthusiasm. A slightly slower one might add emphasis or caution.

Pitch

The pitch of your voice also varies in day to day conversation and it is important to play on this when making a presentation. For example, your pitch will raise when asking a question; it will lower when you wish to sound severe.

Play around with the volume, pace and pitch of your voice when practising your presentation. Find different ways of saying the same sentence. Explore different ways of adding emphasis to your main points. Always try to convey enthusiasm and energy through your use of your voice.

5. Breathe

Always remember to breath steadily and deeply. If you are anxious about making a presentation your breathing will become fast and shallow. This will affect the quality of your voice and your ability to speak clearly for extended periods of time. Try to take a few deep breaths before you make your presentation, making a conscious effort to slow your breathing down and taking in more air with each breath. During your presentation, use pauses after questions or at the end of sections to allow comfortable breathing patterns. Don’t be afraid to slow down the pace of your presentation if your breathing becomes uncomfortable.

6. Drink

It is a good idea to have some liquid to hand to quench your thirst if you are speaking for a long time. However, be careful not to gulp ice-cold water before you go on as this constricts your throat and affects the quality of your voice. Drink a warm (not hot) cup of tea to relax your throat and ease your speaking voice.

And finally ... a note about humour

Only use humour if you know it will work. Humour needs to be relaxed and confident - if used badly, it will only heighten senses of awkwardness and anxiety if these are already present. Use humour if you know you can and if you feel it is appropriate to do so.

Conclusion

Continually explore your personal style using any or all of the above suggestions in different combinations for different effects. Above all, remember two main points:

- be yourself— even in the most formal of surroundings you will need to be yourself. No one will be impressed if you try to perform like a classical actor or act like a stand-up comedian;
- avoid any behaviour that might be off-putting to your audience— always be deliberate and clear in your use of your voice and physical actions.

The next leaflet in this series, ***Using visual aids***, looks at how you can use visual images to increase the impact of your presentation.

This study guide is one of a series produced by Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills.

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