



# Effective presentations

Presentations are an integral part of university assessments due to the variety of skills that can be assessed. You may be asked to prepare and deliver a presentation on a topic; as a poster, slideshow, viva or group presentation. The purpose of this guide is to advise you on what makes an engaging and effective presentation with helpful tips and tricks to implement in the creation and delivery of your presentation.

## What makes an effective presentation?

- The content used is strong, relevant to the assessment criteria and is at the right level for the course.
- The presentation guides the audience through the use of a sound structure and provides reasons to justify the position of the presenter.
- Clear, organised, well-presented, easy for the audience to follow and extract key points
- Well-paced and moves at a speed that keeps the audience's attention without moving quickly through multiple topics
- Well-researched through the presentation of knowledge, discussion of perspectives and the ability to answer questions that accrue
- Makes excellent use of technology in a way that makes the presentation smooth, professional and ready to go
- Well-rehearsed and style reflects a clear amount of preparation, thought and practice
- Interesting and enjoyable in terms of points of interest, style or a good use of illustrative methods



(Cottrell, 2019, p. 189)

## Preparation

### Content/Topic

**Read and research** – despite a presentation being a new form of assessment, it is essential that you are well-informed on the topic at hand. You will be expected to include literature in your presentation and be able to condense the information you have read down to the essentials. Try summarising each piece of literature you need to include, so you can relay a concise version to your audience.

**Less is more** – Like any other assignment, presentations should be drafted and edited. You might find that you have a lot more content than you could ever hope to include in the time allocated and reading something takes a lot less time than saying it. Feel confident that you won't be able to include every point you wish to make on the screen, but you can bullet point main themes and talk around them!

**Selection is key** – Presentations are a great opportunity to use visual material such as graphs, pie charts, tables and diagrams. These visual representations of theories lend themselves more naturally to discussion and will prompt you to deliver your content verbally rather than having the text on screen.

**Make an argument** – Your presentation still needs to make an argument and demonstrate that you have thought critically about material. As well as summarising, think about the strengths and weaknesses of the literature you intend to use.

## Structure

**Introduction** – Your presentation should include an introduction to yourself as the presenter, and to the content that is going to follow. Ensure you direct your audience to any activities or materials that have been provided and brief them on their purpose.

**Slide order** – Your presentation should cover the main points you wish to make. If you are using a slide presentation, then try numbering the points you would like to make and then ensure that your slides flow in this order. If you are discussing a theory then you can take your audience through the components in a logical sequence, or if you are creating an argument, you could divide it into numbered chunks.



**Making links** – Make effective use of signposts throughout your presentation to guide your audience through your content and make links to other information. Creating a clear sense of direction for your audience helps to keep them engaged and involved.

**Conclusion** – Your conclusion can be used to recap the main points for your audience. It is vital that you 'wrap up' your presentation, rather than ending it abruptly, as this creates a lasting impression on your audience. You can sum up what you have covered, review the main arguments that have accrued, or leave a final statement to resonate with your audience.

**References** – Include a reference page for any materials that you have referred to throughout your presentation. If you have used any images, then ensure you credit them for copyright reasons.

## **Consistency**

**Style** – Make sure that you follow any style guidelines that have been given to you by your module leader in terms of fonts, size, colours etc. Make sure that your presentation is visible to everyone and if you are using slides or posters, you provide ‘breathing space’ around the different elements included.

**Timing** – Try to spread your allocated time evenly among the different sections of your presentation. If one section is taking up a disproportionate amount of time, then it might be a sign that your presentation needs some editing, or more division of materials.

## **Assessment criteria**

If you are unsure of the approach you need to take or what to include in your presentation, then the assessment criteria are a clear indicator of what you need to do. This will also clarify whether you need to submit your slides/poster for marking, as well as stipulating the medium you must use to undertake the practical delivery of the presentation.

## **Visual Aids**

If the medium of presentation isn't explicitly stated in your assessment criteria, then you will have to decide whether you would like to use visual aids or not. The use of visual aid should be governed by the occasion and any situational constraints (Van Emden & Becker, 2016).

**Venue** – Before planning your presentation, you will need to check that the venue can support your preferred method of delivery. For example, if you'd like to use a slide show, then you should check that the venue can accommodate the appropriate technology. If it doesn't, then take steps to rectify this or be prepared to use another medium of delivery.

**Audience** – The golden rule of presentations is that your audience should be able to see everything you are presenting. Pay attention to the room layout for a presentation and amend this to optimise the audience view or space to enable planned activities.

## **Additional Materials**

**The script** – Any notes you create to accompany your presentation should act as a personal prompt, not a script to read from. Good presentation notes need to help you determine which information is most significant, jog your memory, follow the structure and keep you on track. If you are unsure what to pick out from a mass of information to transform into notes, then consider these questions:

- What is significant/important about my subject?
- What is new about the topic?
- What might be interesting to the audience?

(Crasswell & Poore, 2012)

Although you may be tempted to create a complete script for you to read from on the day, you should avoid this. It is likely that you will be assessed on your presenting skills, as well as your subject knowledge. Reading from a script creates a barrier between you and your audience; the very people you need to convince of your perspective! If you feel comforted by a script, why not use the script during rehearsal and then crib your notes into smaller chunks from the original script. That way, your notes are a memory aid and leave you free to engage with your audience.

**Handouts** – Handouts are a great way to impress your audience as you are offering them materials that they can engage with throughout your presentation, and, if constructed correctly, act as a reminder of content from the session. Attendees can make their own meaning with notes or doodles and refer back to the materials at a later point. However, it is important that you don't bombard your audience with handouts or provide them with handouts that have no real or clear relevance to the session. Van Emden and Becker (2016) make the following suggestions:

Know why you are using each handout and at what point the audience needs to refer to them
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Achieve a balance of useful information and blank space so the reader isn't overwhelmed
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Print enough handouts and bring spare for any additional attendees
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Have a 'presenter's handout' so you can see what the audience see, and annotate it with any notes of your own
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**Whiteboards/Flip charts** – If you aren't using an interactive screen for your presentation, or if the technology has failed, then whiteboards and flipcharts are a great tool. You can summarise any points, or jot down key information to convey to your audience. You can also handover the pens to the audience and ask them to engage. Allow your audience time to capture what has been written before erasing the information though!



## Presentation tools

Whether you are using a slideshow, a poster, or some other means of presenting, there is a fantastic array of support and materials available for you to use. The [Marjon TELKit](#) is devised by the Digital Innovation Team and showcases a number of apps that can be used for the purposes of presentations. Additionally, all students can access [Digital Skills Training](#) for advice and guidance on how to create posters, format documents and optimise your use of Microsoft PowerPoint. (Please note that you will need to log in to Learning Space to access these links.)

## Audience

### Know your audience

If you are presenting as part of an assignment then it is likely that you will know your audience: lecturers, fellow students; although, this isn't guaranteed, and it doesn't make the presentation any less nerve-racking! Try profiling your audience before the session. Craswell & Poore (2012, pp. 197-198) recommend focusing on the following:

1. Consider the following:
  - a. Audience size
  - b. Cultural background
  - c. Gender balance
  - d. Age distribution
  - e. Education level
  - f. Work backgrounds
2. Based on the previous information, use the following questions to determine whether your audience will want to *hear* what you have to say:
  - a. What three assumptions can you make about the interests of your audience?
  - b. At what points in your presentation will the interests of your research and knowledge converge with the audience? Once noted, exploit these with activities, humour or real-life examples.



### Language appropriateness

Use your audience profile to accommodate the various communicative requirements of your audience. This might be the inclusion of specialist language for your discipline, which you might need to clarify for non-specialists; ensuring enunciation and simpler language for non-native English speakers; or ensuring you are positioned clearly for anyone who is hard of hearing to view your lips as you speak.

**Informal, not casual** - You should speak informally too, in order to build a connection with your audience. You can use *I* and *you* to refer to yourself and the audience whilst maintaining a level of sophistication.

### Audience engagement

**Audience attention will not be infinite!** If you have key messages, repeat them throughout your talk so your audience has plenty of opportunities to capture them.

**Use stories and real-life examples** - Audiences like vivid examples that they can relate to in order to further their understanding.

**Ask your audience questions** – Keep your audience engaged by asking for their opinion or understanding at regular intervals. You can try an interactive poll through an app such as [Kahoots](#) or [Socrative](#), which allows the audience to view a quick result, and provides a platform for quiet audience members to engage with too.

### Responding to questions

You may be asked questions during your presentation, and you should offer a platform for questions at the end. Knowing how to handle different types of questions will help you make the most of them when they crop up.

<b>The uncertain question</b>	Sometimes, audience members might be unsure of how to ask a question or what they are trying to ask. Don't be afraid to ask them to reformulate the question if you are uncertain what is being asked.
<b>I don't know the answer!</b>	Don't worry! You won't know all of the answers. Sometimes, research is incomplete or there will be things you hadn't thought about. Admit this fact and thank the audience member for drawing your attention to it.
<b>Irrelevant questions</b>	If a question is outside the scope of your presentation, then acknowledge that this is the case. You can always state that 'separate research would be interesting on this topic', smile and move on.
<b>Was that even a question?</b>	Sometimes, audience members may speak up, but not actually ask a question. If you have time, you can allow short exchanges, but if they are lengthy, politely remind your audience member that there will be time at the end of the presentation for questions.
<b>Antagonistic questions</b>	These might catch you off guard. Feel safe that the presentation isn't the forum to begin an argument, so answer if you can, and move on. If you feel like you'd like to have a deeper discussion about the issue, then offer the audience member to discuss it after the presentation.

(Crasswell & Poore, 2012, p. 208-209)

## Preparation & rehearsal

When it comes to presentations, practice really does make perfect! Try not to leave things to chance; rehearse your delivery so you can iron out any creases well in advance, and when you can, practice in front of an audience.

### Dress rehearsal

Ask a few friends from a different course to come and observe your presentation and run through it in the exact same way you intend to on the day of the presentation. Think about the types of feedback you would find helpful and ask them to pay particular attention to this and answer honestly. You can then use this feedback to tweak certain elements of the presentation (Cottrell, 2019).

### Timing

During your rehearsals, make sure you time yourself. If you have a dress rehearsal, ask your friend to record where you are at the 5-minute mark, 10-minute mark etc. That way, if you aren't as far along as you should be, you know where you need to edit. Additionally, you will need to ensure that time is allocated to the activities outside of the main talk; such as switching slides or answering on the spot questions.

### Group presentations

The key to a successful group presentation is co-ordination and co-operation. Aim to practice as a complete group before the presentation to optimise your performance. You might find the following helpful:

- **Plan the order** – co-ordinate each section so all group members are aware of when to begin or introduce to other group members. This involves listening carefully to the parts of others, so ensure you engage with everyone's parts; not just your own.
- **Troubleshoot** – decide as a group what to do if you run over your allocated time, or key information is missed. Work together to predict the types of question that might be asked and determine an answer.
- **Use your strengths** – decide as a group who would be more suited to what section based on their strengths. For example, if an individual is more comfortable with answering questions, then allow them to take the lead.



## Delivery

### Non-verbal communication (NVC)

In presentations, what we don't say is sometimes more powerful than what we do say. NVC plays a huge part in all presentations and it is helpful to bear some of the following in mind.

**Eye contact** – Make brief eye contact with as many people in the room as possible. Try to avoid looking over people's heads or fixating on one or two people.

**Facial expression** – Smile at your audience from the beginning of your presentation: it suggests approachability, shared experience and a connection with your audience.

**Sit or stand?** – Be guided by the size of your audience and the occasion. Bigger groups will require standing so all audience members can see you; smaller groups may permit you to sit so you can speak to individuals.

### Speech

Watch some videos of your favourite public speaker and note what it is about their style that draws you to them. List these features and see if there are any elements you can use in your own presentation.

### Nerves

Nerves are natural when giving a presentation, but it is important to use them to your advantage and keep the presentation in perspective. Nerves will allow you to create a connection with your audience; they might be able to empathise with you! Rehearsal will help to calm nerves and having visual aids such as short videos or images might allow you a short break to compose yourself during the presentation.

## Reflect

Relax, your presentation is complete! Now use this opportunity to reflect on your performance and what you think went well, and what you would do differently. This will help you with any future presentations you have to give.

### References

Cottrell, S. (2019). *The study skills handbook*. (5<sup>th</sup> ed). London, UK: Red Globe Press.

Craswell, G. & Poore, M. (2012). *Writing for academic success*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). London, UK: Sage

Van Emden, J. & Becker, L. (2016). *Presentation skills for students*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). London, UK: Palgrave.