

PRESENTATIONS: HELPFUL HINTS

Developed by the Center for Global Communication and Design
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Career advancement in both the academic and the professional arenas may very well depend upon your ability to communicate to a variety of audiences. For example, you may be asked to present lab reports, technical briefs, or training instructions. You can make the large task of constructing and delivering an oral presentation more manageable if you divide the assignment into small goals and then approach the overall task methodically.

Being systematic in your preparation for a presentation helps with anxiety. Nearly everyone is nervous when speaking in front of a group; therefore, audiences are generally sympathetic. Luckily, most of the symptoms of nervousness that plague the speaker remain hidden to the audience. Nervous tension also allows speakers to deliver a charged rather than a flat performance. Try to relax and enjoy helping your audience understand the technical information you deliver. Remember: The more you practice, the more confident you will be, and the smoother your presentation will go! You can use these instructions as a guideline to help you both organize the material and structure your presentation to meet your audience's informational needs.

Know Your Task and Audience

When you first begin this project, make certain you can clearly explain what you are attempting to accomplish and for whom. You can think about your task in these ways:

- Identify the topic of your presentation in a complete sentence that explains the significance of this subject to the listeners.
- Specify the kinds and amount of information you must convey to the audience.
- Identify many key points you want the audience to understand.
- List the important questions you want to answer in your presentation.

In addition, you will need to carefully assess the knowledge, expectations, and values your audience brings to the exchange. It is only when the audience's needs are genuinely acknowledged by the speaker that effective communication can take place.

Determine the nature of the background information that the audience brings to your subject by listing key terms and concepts that you can reasonably assume they understand.

Describe what the audience needs to learn from you about the specific topic and focus upon these items as controlling concepts for your presentation.

Identify the significant values that the audience brings to the presentation. Ask yourself:

- What are the notable characteristics of this audience? Curious? Inhibited? Cautious? Eager? Expert? Novice?
- Does this audience respect a formal or informal style?
- Does this audience value simplicity or complexity?
- Would this audience respond more favorably to traditional or innovative approaches?
- Is this audience participating voluntarily or by external request?

After evaluating your audience, it's important to consider any time and/or space constraints. Those constraints may impact developing the structure, content, and delivery of the information you're sharing.

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Structure Your Presentation

Consider the location, size, and spatial arrangement of the presentation area, as well as the length of time associated for the speech when you begin to envision your presentation.

Match the length of time for the presentation with the focus of your topic.

Identify key physical characteristics of the space, including size, seating arrangement, lighting, etc.

These physical constraints play into how you decide to organize your presentation. An accomplished speaker should fully understand his/her subject. A very useful method for achieving this is to organize your material as if you had to explain it to another person. You might organize your information according to:

- Classifications – organizes information into groups that share common characteristics
- Partition or spatial divisions – organizes information into major components and their minor sub-components.
- Segmentation – explains the relationship of events over time
- Comparison – attempts to present one item in the terms of another
- Cause and effect – describes and persuades by means of identifying causal relationships
- Problem and solution – organizes material in response to a dilemma
- Experimentation – organizes the information given, the purpose, aim, materials, procedures, results, and discussion in that order

Provide an illustrative example for each main point and explain the relationship of the example to the point it supports.

Use a variety of different kinds of support or proof for your statements, such as facts, statistics, examples, comparisons, testimonies (an eye witness account or a direct quotation), narrative (a story). This way you reach and persuade various members of your audience.

Repeat key concepts/points by expressing one idea in several different ways, thereby reinforcing important points.

For example, the problem-solution framework might be appropriate for a speech on waste management. You could structure the presentation as a series of key dilemmas, each one followed by a number of possible responses, the first being the ineffective response, and the second the better choice. Each time a problem is introduced, the listener anticipates a range of possible solutions and thereby become more receptive to the information that follows. Your well-organized presentation also needs a frame to introduce and conclude it.

Frame Your Presentation

The Introduction

With an attention-grabbing introduction, you can establish a framing device for the entire presentation. You may find it more efficient to construct the introduction after the body of the presentation has been developed. Then you can clearly see the nature of the technical material that must be introduced to the audience to attract their interest and meet their informational needs. The introduction must draw the audience's attention, identify your topic, and create expectations in the audience that you will satisfy in the course of the presentation.

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Immediately gain the audience's attention by connecting their needs/values/knowledge to the topic of the speech. You may choose to share:

- an interesting fact, statistic, anecdote, etc.
- an appeal to a common ground of understanding or experience between you and your audience
- a narrative or story to draw the audience into your domain
- an overview of your speech to provide audience with a basic framework

It's also important to create expectations for your audience that you will fulfill in the course of the presentation. To do this, you might:

- Create and repeat an organizational structure or pattern
- Acknowledge and then answer questions you know the audience will broach
- Introduce and then reference key terms throughout the course of the presentation
- Offer periodic overviews and then periodic summaries of material

Your introduction will be half of the framing devices needed; the other half is the conclusion.

The Conclusion

An effective conclusion seems to develop naturally from the structure and content of the presentation as a whole. A conclusion isn't simply a rewording of the introduction; the conclusion is a separate and distinct part of your presentation. In it, you need to:

- identify for the audience the most important point of the presentation
- connect with the framing context that you introduced in the beginning
- reaffirm the connection between the audience and the material presented

Match the tone of the final remarks to what you perceive is the audience's primary need. You might offer:

- a summary of key points and/or sections of the presentation
- a personal anecdote
- a restatement of the problem and a brief summary of the solution
- a resolution of the shocking statistic
- an answer to a significant question

Now that your presentation is organized and framed, you can add visuals (as needed) and practice your presentation in its entirety.

Select Visuals

Since most people rely heavily upon visual information cues, you can assist your audience by incorporating visual aids into your presentation. These help you to emphasize key points for your audience to understand and remember. Choose these sparingly, otherwise they could become distracting.

For more advice/tips on how to use visuals in presentations, click [here](#). And [here](#).

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First, you should identify the purpose of your visual aid:

- to clarify a key point
- to provide an illustrative example
- to model
- to summarize
- to entertain while informing

Select types of visual aids well matched to the needs of your audience with respect to specific portions of your presentation.

- table – good for presenting groups of detailed facts
- bar graph – can represent numerical qualities
- line graph – shows how one quantify changes as a function of change in another quantity
- pie graph – effective for depicting the composition of a whole
- diagram – similar to a drawing but relies upon symbols
- flow chart – means of representing successions of events
- organizational chart – usually depicts hierarchical arrangement

Select presentation vehicles (and make sure they're working) based upon the audience's seating arrangement.

- overhead
- easel or chalkboard
- hand-out
- slides
- model
- computer screen

Critique your visual aid from the perspective of the audience's needs.

- Is it large enough to be easily seen or is it too small and detailed?
- Is the contrast/color effective or distracting?
- Does it clarify a difficult concept or introduce confusion?
- Is the visual aid necessary or superfluous?

Remember to Practice

You can meet the needs of your audience best by personally connecting with them, and by practicing your presentation. You should:

- maintain eye contact with the audience
- use natural hand gestures
- keep body movement quiet and natural
- maintain appropriate voice volume
- avoid wearing distracting clothing or accessories
- maintain a constant rate of speech

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If possible, practice your presentation in the very place you'll deliver it. If there are visuals in your presentation, integrate them into your practice so you know when to reference them effectively. Finally, don't feel you have to memorize the entire piece. In many cases, you will be able to use memory prompts such as note cards or an outline. Prompts, though, should never replace practicing a presentation. Practice makes progress.

In addition, Comm+D has a designated practice room for presentations! [Make an appointment](#) with one of our graduate TAs or undergraduate mentors to help you plan your presentation, offer visual design and/or presentation delivery feedback, or answer any questions you have about public speaking.

Sources & Works Cited

Galke, Sue. 101 Ways to Captivate a Business Audience, New York: Anacom, 1997. Morrisey, George L., etal. Loud and Clear. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997.