



PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLIC SPEAKING

Like anything else, presentations become easier with preparation and practice. It's natural to feel nervous in the days and hours leading up to any public performance. Even experienced actors and politicians admit they still suffer from stage fright from time to time! There are many ways to lessen performance-related anxiety and its impact on your delivery. Whether you're working on a five-minute speech or a dissertation defense, you'll want to understand what's expected of you, craft a realistic plan for the available time, rehearse, deploy visual aids and other media effectively, and dress for success.

Know your audience and understand its expectations

If your assignment guidelines aren't clear on the following points, be sure to ask your professor for clarification well in advance of your presentation date:

- How much time will you have? Will you be allowed or expected to read from notes?
- Is the presentation meant to be an uninterrupted talk followed by questions, or more of a facilitated group discussion?

- What kinds of supplemental media will you be allowed or expected to develop (e.g. slides, handouts, a poster, audio-clips, videos)?
- Is a marking scheme available?

Research and write your notes

Define the scope and structure of your talk. Don't prepare a full-length essay, but structure your presentation as you would an essay. What are your objectives? What are you arguing, critiquing, comparing, investigating or demonstrating? Present your points in a logical order, discuss the implications of your analysis and conclude with a brief summary.

Design your supplemental media

Be sensitive to your audience when designing visual aids. Consider eyestrain and colour contrast. Is it more effective to show a slide containing a full paragraph of text or an image to accompany your verbal remarks on a vital finding or event? How long should that video clip be? What should you include and exclude on that handout? The answers may depend on the nature of your talk, but think about some of the more captivating presentations you've attended in the past. What made them intriguing? What made others boring?

Rehearse in real time

Don't just review your talk in your head. Practice out loud and time yourself. This is how you identify trouble spots. How is that Latin word pronounced? How will you hold your note cards? Will you need to leave time to fiddle with equipment or write on a flipchart? Have some friends or family members critique a dry run or record a video that you can review. Invite your friends to ask you challenging questions, so you can brainstorm answers with a supportive audience and practice thinking on your feet.

Dress for success

Decide what you'll wear at least a day in advance. This isn't the time to experiment with a brand-new outfit—what if it's itchier or stiffer than you'd expected? You want to be presentable but comfortable. Aim for attire you'd wear to a job interview. The morning of your presentation, leave enough time to shower, eat and get dressed.

Visualize the whole day

If possible, visit the room ahead of time to familiarize yourself with the seating configuration, acoustics and AV setup. Pack your bag the night before. Be sure you have a water bottle, a watch or timer, your handouts, a USB drive containing your slides, all the components of your outfit and a cardboard tube if you're bringing a rolled-up poster.

Showtime

Take a deep breath and have faith in your preparation. Remember, most symptoms of nervousness—sweaty palms, butterflies in your stomach—aren't visible to the audience. In fact, your audience has no idea what you planned to say or do, and they won't know that something went wrong unless you call attention to it. Don't apologize for any nervousness. If you make a factual error, simply correct yourself and move on.

The question period

This is where the benefits of your dry run will really show. If you don't know the answer to a question, be honest, but show that you understand the question's validity and know how to investigate the answer. Not all questions are criticisms or objections—they're often just observations. Either way, it's perfectly acceptable to ask for clarification.

You did it!

After your talk, ask your TA, professor, or classmates for their honest opinions. Did you cover enough material or too much? Did you allow enough time for discussion? We improve only by seeking constructive feedback and reflecting on it.

Going forward

As you move beyond your degree program, you'll find that most presentations you'll be tasked with—seminars, conference papers, job talks—are simply professional conversations about a topic of mutual interest. You're shifting from being a student to being a colleague: a fellow member of a field, industry and community. As such, one effective way to prepare for presentations is to talk to your peers, professors and teaching assistants throughout your time in school. Talk to others about problems you're investigating, compelling issues on your mind, findings that startle you, events that fascinate you and contributions that you hope to make. There is value in studying alone, but it's not the way to gain the practice you'll need to become an effective public speaker.

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