

Presentations

What is a presentation?

Planning and preparing presentations

Giving presentations

Features of a good presentation

Poster presentations

For further information and the full range of study guides go to:

<http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn>

What is a presentation?

At some point in your degree programme you will have to present your work. In its most basic form this just means telling someone else about it. With such a simple definition it is easy to see that presentations can vary greatly, from reporting back to a small and informal group to standing up in front of a whole class with lecturers and industry professionals watching. For some presentations you might be restricted to different forms of audio or visual methods, such as posters or other multi-media formats. Regardless of the type of presentation there are some key points to consider that will help you deliver a good presentation.

Effective communication, once developed, is a skill that will help you throughout the rest of your life, from the classroom project presentations of today to the wedding speeches of tomorrow. You should look at presentations as an opportunity to practise effective communication and presentation skills, which are often desired by employers. Presentations may also provide those who prefer speaking to writing with an alternative way to demonstrate their abilities.

The purpose of your presentation, and the specifications provided in the assignment brief, will help you decide factors such as:

- Presenter(s) – individual or group?
- Duration – how long have you got?
- Formality – what is appropriate?
- Audience – who and how many?
- Assessment – by whom and on what criteria?

Planning and preparing a presentation

Even the most experienced presenters can be nervous before they present. One of the keys to success is using any nervous energy to help drive the planning and preparation. Think of it as a challenge that will offer great opportunities. Effective presenting, like effective writing, is a skill that can be acquired and developed. With sufficient preparation and practice you will be able to deliver an excellent preparation with minimal anxiety. As well as this guide, the one on Critical Thinking will help you to plan and structure your presentation.

When planning a presentation ask yourself the following questions:

Why?

The first important step is to find out why you have to present. This information can usually be found in module handbooks or from the lecturer. Before thinking about the content of your presentation, read the guidelines or brief carefully – and in particular check how it will be assessed.

Who?

Once you have established the reason for giving the presentation, you should then consider the audience. Are you presenting to fellow students, and/or to lecturers, or to individuals or groups not connected with the University? What is their level of understanding of the topic? Will they have any background knowledge and, if so, how much? What will they expect from you? The audience is the most important part of any presentation, if you keep them listening and interested, and they can understand your topic then your presentation will go well.

What?

Once you have considered the above points you will automatically be starting to consider the content. Organise the information or ideas into a logical structure; summarise any notes that you have made and the key points or findings. Write down the main points on index cards and move them so that you can identify which are the most important. (This will also help you to decide on a logical sequence for them – see below).

Presentations generally have very specific time slots, and a common mistake is to try and cover too much. Consider the time you have and what you would like to cover, are the two compatible? If you have ten minutes, that means a minute or so for the introduction, and a minute for summarising, leaving approximately eight minutes for your main discussion. You will not be able to address more than four or five key points in that space of time, depending on how much discussion you need for each point. If you haven't got enough time to cover what you would like, decide on what is most important and briefly explain in your introduction why you have made these choices. Remember "less is more"!

How?

Once you have decided on the material to include, you then need to consider how you are going to structure it. Your introduction should contain an outline of what you aim to cover; put the presentation into context; and, highlight its relevance. Think about including a 'hook', something that will get your audience interested and listening, such as relevant current debates or hot-topics from the news. Where appropriate, personalise your talk, perhaps with a little bit of humour. The main body should then develop your material in a logical order, only giving the most relevant and important detail, and clearly highlighting any significance to the central theme. The conclusion is your opportunity to summarise your key points, any significant findings or results, and possibly emphasise how this compares or contrasts with the literature or what was expected. You might also need to outline what you would do differently in the future or how it could have been improved upon. Finally, thank the audience for their attention and ask if there are any questions.

Using visual aids

Visual aids can add something special to your presentation, provided they are used appropriately. Graphs, images, music or video clips can all help to emphasise key points, or communicate ideas and information more effectively, and they have an immediate impact on the audience in providing detail and direction. There are a number of different types to choose from, including white or blackboards, flipcharts, OHP (overhead projector), slide projector, video, computer-generated display (e.g. PowerPoint), and objects (e.g. models, experiments, products). Try to keep them simple - don't "go overboard" on these as they can end up detracting from the content. Ask your tutor or the media services staff in the library for more information about the availability of different types of visual aids.

PowerPoint

When using PowerPoint you should automatically consider and cater for people with sight problems, dyslexia or other disabilities, here are a few pointers:

- Use a maximum of two font styles and no smaller than 24pt
- Use plain 'sans-serif' fonts such as Verdana or Arial
- Pale backgrounds with dark texts are easiest to read
- Use **bold** rather than *italics* or underlining
- Do not use all UPPER-CASE
- Don't overload slides: a maximum 6 bullet points per slide

Keep the design and style simple; there is strong evidence that suggests people have better recall of simpler slides.

Rehearsal

Try to spend as much time rehearsing your presentation as you do putting it together, you don't want the delivery to let down the content. Remember to speak OUT LOUD when you rehearse and time yourself carefully. Rehearsing will improve presentations in many ways, such as:

- Getting to know the timing, pace and volume to use
- Familiarising you with the content, language and wording
- The more you 'hear' yourself do it the more comfortable and relaxed you will be about it
- It reduces your need for notes (never just read from these!)
- Helps you identify any gaps
- Makes sure that any technology you are using works properly

Giving presentations

Just beforehand try spending some time doing something different and distracting: rather than sitting and waiting, perhaps go for a walk. Get your voice ready by stretching your vocal chords with 'ooooooooos' and 'aaaaaahs', and practise projecting your voice, so it is nice and clear when you start.

When you begin the presentation start with introducing yourself, what you are going to talk about and why it is important. Check with the audience that they can hear and see both you and any visual aids, and let them know when they can ask questions. This can help you relax, improve your confidence by helping you feel in control, and build a rapport with your audience. Aim to talk *to* the audience, not *at* them. Pay attention to the pace of your speech, tone of your voice, the emphasis on key words, and the volume. Try to make eye-contact with as many of the audience as you can, this will help you communicate with them, give it a personal touch and keep them engaged.

Body language is an important part of giving presentations: try to move around, but not fidget, as this helps keep the audience's attention on you. Maintain an open and friendly posture, using your hands to help with emphasis. Standing still with your arms folded or your hands in your pockets can look defensive and off-putting for the audience. Also try to avoid fiddling with hair, a pen or the slide changer, as this can also be distracting for the audience. Direct your attention to where you want them to direct theirs. Before you conclude, summarise the main issues raised in the presentation, and if appropriate ask the audience for any questions or feedback. Repeat what the audience members say so that the whole group can hear. If you don't understand a question, ask the speaker to clarify. If you don't know the answer, say so - you are not expected to know everything. You could ask if anyone else in the room has any suggestions, and/or advise where they might find the answer, and/or offer to look it up for them.

Features of a good presentation

The following is a list of questions to help you prepare a good presentation:

1. Do you know who the audience is and have you pitched your presentation accordingly?
2. Have you identified the purpose of the presentation and made the aims and central message clear?
3. Have you gathered the relevant information and identified the key points?
4. Does the presentation have a clear structure (introduction, main body and conclusion)?
5. Is the introduction engaging and interesting, and does it include an outline of the presentation?
6. Does your conclusion draw together the key points, indicate what might happen next and leave your audience with something to think about?
7. Have you selected an appropriate method of delivery e.g. PowerPoint, and have you checked the technology is working and available on the day e.g. computer and projector?
8. Have you rehearsed the presentation several times, perfecting the timing, fluency (not reading a script), ensuring the flow (like telling a story), and use of body language?
9. Have you considered what questions might be asked and thought about possible answers?

Poster presentations

Poster presentations are usually displayed at conferences and other similar gatherings. Since they offer an excellent way of summarising and presenting work they are now becoming increasingly used as an alternative form of assessment for students.

As with any presentation it is important to carefully consider what the purpose of the poster is, and what you would like it to communicate. Who will be looking at it and what message do you want them to take away? Consider design issues such as the layout and style. You might find a metaphor for your topic that can determine the design of the poster to communicate your message visually to your audience. People may only look at your poster very briefly, so your message or theme needs to be very clear and comprehensible. An eye-catching poster attracts attention: meaningful content will then impress and influence your audience.

Here are some general guidelines:

- Aim for a 50:50 balance between text and graphics/visuals
- It should be readable from 2 - 3 metres away

- There should be a natural flow or storyline through the poster that the eye follows easily
- Keep text brief but informative
- Do not overload it: too much information can reduce the impact of the message

Recommended reading

Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2008) *Essential study skills: the complete guide to success at university* (2nd ed.). London: Sage

Levin, P. and Topping, G. (2006) *Perfect presentations*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Race, P. (2007) *How to get a good degree: making the most of your time at university*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

For further information and the full range of study guides go to: <http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn>

Learning Development
www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn
learn@plymouth.ac.uk
Learning Gateway, RLB 011
01752 587676

Tutorials
Drop-in Zone
Taught sessions
Peer Assisted Learning Scheme
Online support