

## COMMENTARY – Professional Development

# Effective presentation skills

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One sentence summary: How to develop and deliver an effective presentation.

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### ABSTRACT

Most PhD's will have a presentation component during the interview process, as well as presenting their work at conferences. This article will provide guidance on how to develop relevant content and effectively deliver it to your audience.

**Keywords:** effective; presentation; skills

Most organizations list communication skills as one of their most critical issues... and presentation skills are a large component of communications. Presentation skills are crucial to almost every aspect of academic/business life, from meetings, interviews and conferences to trade shows and job fairs. Often times, leadership and presentation skills go hand in hand. NACE Survey 2016 - Ability to communicate verbally (internally and externally) ranked 4.63/5.0 and was the #1 skill employers want. The information provided in this article is designed to provide tips and strategies for delivering an effective presentation, and one that aligns the speaker with the audience.

When preparing your presentation, in addition to evaluating the technical content needed, you need to understand:

1. What type of speaker are you?
2. Facts and fears of public speaking.
3. Your blueprint for delivery.

Identify what type of speaker you are:

- *Avoider*—You do everything possible to escape from having to get in front of an audience.
- *Resister*—You may have to speak, but you never encourage it.
- *Acceptor*—You'll give presentations but don't seek those opportunities. Sometimes you feel good about a presentation you gave.

- *Seeker*—Looks for opportunities to speak. Finds the anxiety a stimulant that fuels enthusiasm during a presentation.

Facts and fears:

- Public speaking can create anxiety and fear in many people. Dale Carnegie has a free e-book that provides tips and advice on how to minimize these fears [www.dalecarnegie.com/Free-eBook](http://www.dalecarnegie.com/Free-eBook)
- People are caught between their fear and the fact that many employers expect them to demonstrate good verbal communication skills.
- Most interviews by PhD's have a presentation component.
- Academic interviews always have a presentation component.
- If your job doesn't demand presentation skills, odds are that you'll need them in your next job

Develop your blueprint for delivery:

Information by itself can be boring, unless it's unique or unusual. Conveying it through stories, gestures and analogies make it interesting. A large portion of the impact of communications rests on how you look and sound, not only on what you say. Having good presentation skills allows you to make the most out of your first impression, especially at conferences and

job interviews. As you plan your presentation put yourself in the shoes of the audience.

*Analyze the audience*

- *Values...* What is important to them?
- *Needs...* What information do they want?
- *Constraints...* Understand their level of knowledge on the subject and target them appropriately.
- *Demographics...* Size of audience and location may influence the presentation. For example, a large auditorium may be more formal and less personal than a presentation to your team or lab mates in a less formal setting.

There are three key components of a good presentation:

1. Structure—Introduction, Content and Conclusion
2. Body Language and Movement
3. Verbal Delivery

## STRUCTURE

### Introduction

- Build rapport with audience (easier in a smaller less formal setting).
- State preference for questions—during or after?
- Set stage: provide agenda, objective and intended outcomes

Introduce yourself providing your name, role and function. Let the audience know the agenda, your objectives and set their expectations. Give them a reason to listen and make an explicit benefit statement, essentially what's in it for them. Finally, let them know how you will accomplish your objective by setting the agenda and providing an outline of what will be covered.

### Content

- Deliver your message logically and structured.
- Use appropriate anecdotes and examples.
- Illustrate and emphasize key points by using color schemes or animations.
- Establish credibility, possibly citing references or publications.

Structure your presentation to maximize delivery. Deliver the main idea and communicate to the audience what your intended outcome will be. Transition well through the subject matter and move through your presentation by using phrases such as; 'now we will review...' or 'if there are no more questions, we will now move onto...' Be flexible and on course. If needed, use examples not in the presentation to emphasize a point, but don't get side tracked. Stay on course by using phrases such as 'let's get back to...' Occasionally, reiterate the benefits of the content and the main idea of your presentation.

### Conclusion

- Restate the main objective and key supporting points
- For Q&A: 'Who wants more details?' (Not, 'any questions?')
- Prompting for questions: 'A question I often hear is...'

Summarize the main elements of your presentation as they relate to the original objective. If applicable, highlight a key point or crucial element for the audience to take away. Signal the end is near... 'to wrap up' or 'to sum up'. Clearly articulate the next steps, actions or practical recommendations. Thank the audience and solicit final questions.

## BODY LANGUAGE AND MOVEMENT

Your non-verbal communications are key elements of your presentation. They are composed of open body posture, eye contact, facial expressions, hand gestures, posture and space between you and the audience.

### Feet/Body

- Stand firmly and move deliberately. Do not sway or shift.
- Move at appropriate times during presentation (e.g. move during transitions or to emphasize a point).
- Stand where you can see everyone and do not block the visuals/screen.

### Hands

- Decide on a resting position for hands (should feel and look comfortable).
- Gestures should be natural and follow what you are saying.
- Hand movement can emphasize your point.
- Make gestures strong and crisp... ok to use both arms/hands.
- Keep hands away from face.
- When pointing to the screen, do so deliberately. Do not wave and face the audience to speak

### Eyes

- Look at audience's faces, not above their heads.
- If an interview or business meeting...look at the decision makers as well as everyone else.
- Look at faces for 3–5 seconds and then move on to the next person.
- Do not look away from the audience for more than 10 seconds.
- Looking at a person keeps them engaged.

Looking at their faces tells you how your delivery and topic is being received by the audience. The audience's body language may show interest, acceptance, openness, boredom, hostility, disapproval and neutrality. Read the audience and adjust where and if appropriate to keep them engaged. For example, if they seem bored inject an interesting anecdote or story to trigger more interest. If they appear to disapprove, ask for questions or comments to better understand how you might adjust your delivery and content if applicable.

## VERBAL DELIVERY

Use spoken verbiage rather than written

- Use active rather than passive verbs.
- Avoid technical terms, unless you know the audience is familiar with them.
- Always use your own words and phrases.
- Cut out jargon/slang words.

Look at your audience and use vocal techniques to catch their attention. Consider changing your pace or volume, use a longer than normal pause between key points, and change the pitch or inflection of your voice if needed. Consider taking a drink of water to force yourself to pause or slowdown. View the audience as a group of individual people, so address them as if they were a single person.

## Tips for reducing anxiety

If you experience nervousness before your presentation, as most people do, consider the following.

*Be Organized*—Knowing that your presentation and thoughts are well organized will give you confidence.

*Visualize*—Imagine delivering your presentation with enthusiasm and leaving the room knowing that you did a good job.

*Practice*—All successful speakers rehearse their presentations. Either do it alone, with your team, or video tape yourself and review your performance after. Another tip is to make contact before your talk. If possible, speak with the audience before your presentation begins; however, not always possible with a large audience. Walk up to them and thank them in advance for inviting you to speak today.

*Movement*—Speakers who stand in one spot may experience tension. In order to relax, move in a purposeful manner and use upper body gestures to make points.

*Eye Contact*—Make your presentation a one-on-one conversation. Build rapport by making it personal and personable. Use words such as ‘we’, ‘our’, ‘us’. Eye contact helps you relax because you become less isolated from the audience.

## Personal appearance

Clothes should fit well, not too tight. Consider wearing more professional business-like attire. Find two to three colors that work well for you. Conservative colors, such as black, blue, gray and brown, seem to be the safest bet when presenting or meeting someone for the first time in a professional setting. Depending upon the audience, a sport coat and well-matched dress slacks are fine. Generally, try to avoid bright reds, oranges and whites, since these tend to draw attention away from your face. Avoid jewelry that sparkles, dangles or makes noise. Use subtle accessories to compliment your outfit.

Other resources: [www.toastmasters.org](http://www.toastmasters.org) <https://www.skillyouneed.com/present/presentation-tips.html>  
<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/evaluation/documents/effective-presentations-a-toolkit-for-engaging-an-audience>

Finally, there are three key components of a good presentation: Do your best to deliver all three.

1. Structure—Introduction, Content and Conclusion
2. Body Language and Movement
3. Verbal Delivery