

5

Ten Steps for Preparing your Presentation

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Reading this chapter will help you to:

- understand the importance of planning for your presentation
- use your time effectively to reduce the stress
- research the content of the presentation
- follow the ten-step plan for your presentation

Good preparation and planning are essential for successful presentations. The quality of your presentation usually reflects the amount of preparation you have done. Many students feel overwhelmed with the work needed for a presentation and may not know how to approach the task. Some students underestimate the amount of preparation needed and leave this work until a few days before the scheduled date. Both of these approaches can cause stress but some of this stress can be reduced if you follow the ten-step plan that we suggest below.

- 1 Read and re-read the briefing details for the presentation.
- 2 Create a task list or mind map.
- 3 Create a time chart.
- 4 Review your existing knowledge of the topic.
- 5 Research and read to gain new knowledge.
- 6 Decide on the balance of the content.
- 7 Find relevant examples.
- 8 Identify your audience.
- 9 Create the content, visual aids and documentation.
- 10 Rehearse the presentation.

Some of these tasks will only take a short amount of time while others will take longer or be ongoing throughout the preparation period. From this list you will see that creating and writing the content are listed as number nine and you might think this is too late in the

sequence of tasks. You should not interpret this as waiting to create the content until just before the presentation event. All of the previous tasks feed into the content creation.

We think reviewing your progress should be an ongoing task. As you work through the stages outlined above, you will gain a clearer sense of the tasks needed and should be able to identify more realistic time frames. Ongoing reviews will make you aware of your progress or lack of progress and should help you to improve your motivation and time management.

Some of these tasks are covered in much more detail in later chapters and we give links to these when relevant. However, you might find it useful to review these tasks before you choose to read any of these other chapters.

1 Read and re-read the briefing details for the presentation

This may seem obvious but we have had many experiences where the presentations have been interesting but the students have not actually done what was asked of them. Because of this, we suggest that your first step should be to read the briefing sheet to make sure that you fully understand what you have to do. Look at how the marks are allocated if it is an assessed presentation. Think about what you can do and how you can do it well so that you can earn a good mark. Most tutors will be happy to answer your questions so if you are unsure of any of the details ask them to explain it more clearly. Usually, if you are not sure about something, there will also be other students feeling the same.

If the presentation is for a job interview, as in Example 6 in Chapter 1, try to make sure that you have a clear understanding of what the panel expect from you. If the details are open or rather vague, decide how you are going to fulfil the task and include a brief description of your approach in the introduction.

2 Create a task list or mind map

Creating this list or a mind map will be easier as you gain more experience of presentations but in most situations, it will be useful to think about all of the tasks that need to be completed for the presentation. You will probably only need to spend a few minutes on this stage of your preparation. The list of tasks will vary according to the type and purpose of the presentation but if you find it difficult to create your own list, you could use these general headings as a working framework.

- Research the topic
- Read and develop the content

- Create visual aids and documentation
- Review and rehearse the presentation

We list these headings in their expected order of progress. However most of these tasks will be ongoing and may need to be reviewed regularly. If you prefer working with mind maps then this is a useful stage to create one as a working document.

An alternative list of working headings could be those we have used for this chapter. You can use these whether you are working alone or in a group:

- Create a task list
- Create a time chart
- Review your existing knowledge
- Research and read to gain new knowledge
- Decide on the balance of the content
- Find relevant examples
- Identify your audience
- Prepare the content, visual aids and documentation
- Rehearse the presentation

These take a similar approach by listing the tasks in a natural sequence of progression but they are more specific in how they define the work needed to be completed. If you are the type of person who works well with lists, you may find these useful. However, if long lists create stress for you, the first set may be a more useful framework to use.

Whichever approach you take, having an order of priority will help to create a structure to your preparation and a realization of what can be achieved in the time available. Your chosen list can also be used to keep you motivated as it may be satisfying to see completed tasks and recognize that you are making progress with the work involved.

As you continue with your preparation, more detailed tasks within each general heading will be identified. An example of this could be under the heading in the second list for 'Finding relevant examples', and you might list:

- 1 Search the web for relevant organizations.
- 2 Contact the organization for brochures.
- 3 Create Case Study profiles.
- 4 Decide how to use these examples in the presentation.

It can be easy to become distracted by the lists or mind maps and give them more time than the actual preparation work for the presentation so do use them carefully.

However, these lists and maps will probably be useful when you are working on several assignments at one time. You could also use them if you are asked to give a progress report to your tutor or for group work when you hold progress review meetings and re-allocate tasks to different members.

See Chapter 7 for more discussion on developing content by using mind maps.

3 Create a time chart

Good time management is a very important part of the preparation period. It is useful to remember that you will need time for researching the topic, learning and understanding new knowledge as well as for creating the content of the presentation. We suggest that you take some time to consider the following points:

- 1 Look at the overall time between receiving the briefing for the presentation and the actual date of delivery. This may vary between perhaps two weeks to several months.
- 2 Create an overall time list where you use the generic headings we suggest above: research the topic, reading and developing content, creating visual aids and documentation, review and rehearsal. This could be developed by week rather than by actual date.
- 3 Now think about your commitments to lectures and other work during this time period. The actual free time to work on the preparation, in a three-month period, may be limited to just a few days or even a few hours.
- 4 Identify where these free time slots are and how many hours they will be. This will help to remind you that preparation work should begin immediately. Also, if you are aware of when these occur in your schedule, you will be more likely to use them to work on your presentation. The amount of free time in each slot can also influence the tasks you choose at this time. One hour may give you the chance to use a library or search the web to find useful sources of information but a few hours can be used to read, think and write the content.
- 5 Next create a second time list using these dates and tasks to be achieved. It may be useful to build in some slippage time for unexpected problems or delays. You can create these lists by using Microsoft Word or Excel and edit them as you make progress. If you use a diary a general list can be made in the diary with tasks allocated to specific dates and times. If you use a mind map, dates can be included as the map develops.

These five tasks may only take you 30 minutes but it will be time well spent. As the preparation progresses you will need to review your progress. This is especially crucial for group presentations and we discuss this in more detail in Chapter 4. However, it is also essential when you are working alone and will help you to incorporate delays from unexpected events, adapt the content or make the necessary changes. We hope it will

also help to reduce your panic and work more effectively towards the final delivery of your presentation.

4 Review your existing knowledge of the topic

This may seem an obvious or unnecessary stage of the preparation and will be influenced directly by your circumstances. We discuss this briefly here but Chapter 7 will be useful to help you with this stage of your presentation.

The type and purpose of your presentation will influence this stage of your preparation. If you are presenting your own research, you will almost certainly know and understand the topic so will need to move to step five for deciding the balance of the content you will present. If you have been given the topic by a lecturer, or chosen it from a list provided by the lecturer you will need to take a different approach. For this scenario you may have very little knowledge or interest in the topic but you will need to develop this during the preparation period. The following processes will help you.

- Collect together your existing notes on the topic. Scan the material that you have collected already. If you have photocopies, printouts or lecture notes, divide them into piles to develop a working framework. You may find it useful to use adhesive labels to add comments about why an article could be useful.
- Reflect on what you know already. You may have a general overview that has been developed from earlier modules or lectures. This overview may be enough to hold a conversation with a colleague or friend but insufficient for a formal presentation to a mixed audience or group of experts. You will need to sound informed and knowledgeable rather than naïve and superficial. The content will need to have some strength and depth to earn a reasonable mark.
- Write down what you already know about the subject. You probably know more than you think. Use either a notepad or your computer, whichever you prefer, to write down ideas and connections. If you have a strongly visual imagination, use drawings, mind maps, pictures or doodles to help generate ideas and make connections.

5 Research and read to gain new knowledge

There are many different ways to research a topic and you will probably have already developed your preferred approach while working on assignments. We discuss this in more detail in Chapter 7.

Gaining new knowledge is an important and essential preparation stage and usually takes more time than you think it will. We have found that when students feel a sense of panic at this stage, it helps them to first re-read their lecture notes and handouts. We then encourage them to read any recommended readings given for the module or the topic that will be relevant. Finally, we suggest they read the new resources they have found from their research. This does seem to be a rather tedious approach but it can help you if you feel overwhelmed by your lack of knowledge. If you think you do already have a reasonable understanding of the topic, perhaps you can re-read a few relevant handouts and then move on quickly to read the new items found in your research.

In other words, to gain new knowledge on a topic, you need to read yourself into it. To understand new knowledge, it usually takes more than one read and to understand it well enough to present on the topic it will probably take two or three readings. This is why we stressed earlier how important it is to allocate your time well. Reading can seem to be a slow process and for many people the preparation tasks linked to presentations are thought to be the 'doing' tasks, such as creating handouts and a PowerPoint presentation, rather than the more intellectual tasks of reading, thinking and learning.

All of this research and reading will help you to decide what the presentation should be about and what you need to know before you can deliver it. As the content begins to take shape in your mind, you can add more detail to your lists or mind maps and begin to create and organize the content. We look at this in the next section.

6 Decide on the balance of the content

This will be influenced by the academic context and purpose of the presentation and the intended audience. You may need to decide between a big picture approach and one that selects a smaller area with more detail. As you develop your knowledge of the topic, you will feel more confident about what to include and what to leave out. You will also be able to decide what is best covered through speech, text, images and what could be given in a handout rather than used as presentation content.

In many academic situations, we would expect your academic tutor to provide some guidance on this balance and emphasis of the expected content. This might be given in a tutorial or in the briefing instructions so do check if this support is available to you.

As your knowledge develops, you will begin to identify the main themes and issues around the topic. These could be:

- different perspectives or the current situation in contrast to earlier approaches
- what recent research evidence is available

- how government or international policies are impacting on the topic
- new trends that are emerging
- forecasts for the future

7 Find relevant examples

It will be useful during your preparation and research to find several examples you can use to improve the audience understanding of your content. These may be organizations, individuals or incidents reported in the literature or experiences that you or members of the audience may have had. You could choose examples of poor or good practice but you will need to think about how these are used and how much anonymity will be needed. Sometimes, finding examples can improve your own interest and help you to understand the topic at a deeper level.

In the section on creating a task list or mind map, we showed how this task of finding relevant examples could be further divided so we repeat them here to remind you how to collect these examples:

- 1 Search the web for relevant organizations.
- 2 Contact the organization for brochures.
- 3 Create Case Study profiles.
- 4 Decide how you will use these examples in the presentation.

We emphasize this as a task in the preparation stage because it is easier to gather these examples as an ongoing task rather than trying to find them towards the end of your preparation period. Sometimes, it takes quite a long time from contacting an organization for information to actually receiving it. Fortunately, more information is now available on the web, but in our experience many good examples have not been included in student presentations due to the late arrival of suitable information. By allowing plenty of time, you will be able to feel in control of your chosen examples. As your research progresses, earlier examples can be replaced by better ones but being aware of these will almost certainly improve your own understanding of the topic area and the relevance to the context of the module.

8 Identify your audience

We discuss the audience in more detail in Chapter 6. However, during the preparation stages it is useful to remind yourself regularly of who will be listening to and watching the presentation. Again, this will be influenced by the academic context and for some

situations this stage of your preparation will require no real effort on your part or be beyond your control.

Getting to know something about your audience before the event may actually make you feel more nervous. Because of this, you need to make sure that this part of the preparation is useful and helps you to shape the content with the audience in mind. As your work progresses, knowledge of the expected audience and the resulting focus of the content will probably help to reduce your nerves.

If you are giving a presentation at a conference or for a job interview, it will be useful to spend some time finding out whether the audience will be novices or experts. If they are novices, think about how you will develop their knowledge of the topic in a short space of time.

What will they need to know or find useful to know?

How can you make the content interesting to them?

How much useful interaction can you expect from them?

Will they be active, for example by doing exercises, or more passive through sitting, watching and listening?

If they are experts, consider the following questions:

What will be their experience of the topic?

What levels of knowledge will they already have?

Why will they be at the presentation – to assess you in some way or to gain new knowledge?

Many student presentations are delivered in front of other students on the module and this may make you nervous. Some students may prefer presenting to strangers rather than to colleagues. However, in these circumstances it can be useful to remember that if they are also delivering a presentation, they will probably be nervous, less judgmental and more empathic than strangers.

Identifying the audience will also help you to decide what type and style of performance you will need to give and we discussed this in Chapter 3. You may also need to think about what your audience needs to learn from the presentation. If you are presenting content that is part of a module curriculum they will probably feel grateful if your presentation has some meaning for them and is easy to understand. This is discussed in Chapter 10. Who the audience are will also influence the type of supporting documentation that you will need to create and this is covered in Chapter 8.

9 Create the content, visual aids and documentation

This is a very important stage of your preparation, even though this is the penultimate task on our list. All of the previous tasks feed into this stage which will be easier if you have carried out some good research and reading on the topic.

You will probably need to allow quite a lot of time during the preparation period to create the content and the supporting documents required for your presentation. The type and purpose will inevitably influence what you create at this stage. You may need to create three types of documents here:

- The script
- A PowerPoint presentation
- Handouts for the audience

The script

For Example 2 in Chapter 1, a seminar presentation, you may be asked to write a paper that you read aloud and submit for assessment. For this example, some very detailed content will be needed and the preparation will probably seem similar to other types of assignment such as an essay or report.

Some students find it useful to write a script for any type of presentation, even if they will not read the script word for word. They use it as a prompt or as something to rely on if they get really nervous and forget everything they intended to say. You may choose to do this or you may prefer to only write an overview of the structure and use bullet points for the key themes that you intend to cover. You should create whatever you need to perform to the best of your capability.

A PowerPoint presentation

You will also need to decide on the type of visual aids and documents needed and allocate a realistic amount of time to fulfil this task. If you are working in a group the task of creating the PowerPoint presentation can be delegated to one or two of the members after most of the content has been developed. We discuss this in more detail in Chapter 9.

Handouts for the audience

If you intend to provide copies of the PowerPoint slides, creating handouts from these is a simple stage of the process. However, if you are asked to give more detailed handouts,

then you will need extra time to create these from the range of resources used in your research. You may be able to include these as notes pages within the PowerPoint or you may decide to create them as separate text files.

If you are expected to provide a list of references or a bibliography of further readings, this will also take some time to prepare, but these documents can evolve as your research and content develop. Start a file for this and add items as the research progresses.

Remember to include some time for editing the content and documents and for creating the correct number of copies needed. Most people end up with more content than they can use in the time available. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 discuss creating and structuring content and explore how to develop visual aids and supporting documentation.

10 Rehearse the presentation

We believe it is essential to include rehearsal in the stages of preparation. In our experience, students have tended to spend time on the planning and some research but frequently deliver the presentation without much rehearsal. Even if the content is good, the overall impression of the presentation may only be average if there is insufficient rehearsal. The benefits of rehearsal cannot be overemphasized and the following advice may be useful for increasing your confidence and reducing some of the stress. Rather than seeing rehearsal as something to try to fit in if you have the time, break it into smaller areas for rehearsal under the following themes which are also discussed in Chapter 3.

Rehearsal checklist

- Rehearse and learn the factual content and structure so that they are very familiar to you. Make sure that you understand the wider context of the topic so that you will be able to handle questions effectively.
- Rehearse speaking aloud so that you can hear the sound level, pitch and emphasis you need to use in your voice. This will help you to use pauses confidently and prevent you from rushing in to fill the silences that do occur naturally in presentations.
- Rehearse in front of a mirror or video camera so that you can see how members of the audience will see you. This may cause you to change the way that you use your hands or how you hold your notes or cards. Using a mirror or video is a technique used by many actors and professional communicators and can improve your performance considerably.
- Time the rehearsals so that you can edit your content to fit the time available. You may be penalized for taking longer than the time given or you may be told to stop when the

allotted time is up, regardless of how little of the content you have covered. Rehearsal should help you to be realistic about what you can reasonably be expected to cover and what content could be given in a handout.

- Rehearse as part of the group to make sure that it sounds like one complete presentation rather than a set of individual parts with some duplication. Group rehearsal will also help to prevent the presentation overrunning for the reasons we have outlined above.
- Rehearse using the technology to improve your skills and confidence levels. This will also help you to be time efficient. Using the technology should not delay your progress but improve the overall quality. This rehearsal will also help you to be aware of how much movement is needed to operate the technology.
- Rehearse in the physical environment if this is possible. Practice in using tables, lecterns or chairs will be a real help for the actual event. Think about whether you will be sitting or standing during the presentation and which will be the most appropriate for the event. Will you need to move around the room or be expected to remain in one place?

A well rehearsed presentation will improve both your performance and enjoyment of the event. It will help to reduce your nerves and increase your confidence on the day.

Rehearsal may also help to improve your understanding of the content and enable you to answer questions more competently. Improved confidence may help you to be more analytical and objective about your performance. You should be able to understand what worked well, and what could be improved. Individual or group reflection of the event will help to ensure that you learn from the presentation experience and improve your performance in future presentations.

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR PREPARING YOUR PRESENTATION

- 1 See effective planning as an essential part of preparing for the presentation.
- 2 Be realistic about the amount of free time that you have to prepare the presentation so that you use this time effectively.
- 3 Use some of the preparation period to carry out your research and read to improve your knowledge and understanding of the topic.
- 4 Think about the purpose of the presentation and who your audience will be. This will help to make sure the presentation has the correct emphasis and achieves the aims set by the tutor.
- 5 Create interesting content with good examples and a clear structure that fits the time you have been given for the presentation and stimulates discussion.
- 6 Rehearse your presentation several times so that you will be more confident when you deliver it.

Further reading

Bell, Judith (2005) *Doing your Research Project: a Guide for First-time Researchers in Education, Health and Social Science*, 4th edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Buzan, Tony (2003) *The Mind Map Book*. London: BBC Active.

Denscombe, Martyn (2003) *The Good Research Guide*, 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press.