

Having a short time to speak exerts considerable pressure on *selection*, deciding what is most significant to include in your talk. Begin with these questions:

- What is significant/important about my subject?
- What is new about it and what might be especially interesting for my particular audience (return to your audience profile)?

All your effort will be directed to this matter of selection, after which you may decide on an outline of main ideas or key points around which to build your short talk. Or you may decide to develop the talk around a set of graphics (for example, tables, figures, or charts), or as a PowerPoint presentation (note comments below under → 'Slideshow technicalities').

Reading a paper as a presentation

If you are presenting a formal, longer paper and speaking for, say, 50 minutes, you may feel too insecure to work from scripted notes and prefer to read your paper. Or it may be that you are expected to read your paper, word for word.

Coursework students

In a course, you may be asked to read, in a 20–40 minute time slot, a written paper of, say 1,000–2,500 words, to be submitted at the end of the session for assessment, or reworked after feedback from the presentation. Usually, this type of presentation occurs in a tutorial where your audience is homogeneous – fellow students and the lecturer. There is then little to be said in terms of formatting, except to stress that you structure the paper in a way that it will not be too difficult for the audience to follow – you still need to take account of audience needs.

Also, review strategies discussed below under → 'Fine-tuning and rehearsal' (outlining papers, making objectives clear, building in repetition, summarizing key points for emphasis, pausing for effect, projecting voice and varying modulation, and so on).

Research students

You could be asked to produce a substantial written paper as part of a progress review and give a presentation. Some aspects that may concern you about this situation are:

- Trying to reduce a lengthy paper, sometimes 40–50 pages or more, to fit your presentation time.
- Addressing an audience of mixed disciplinary/academic interests, which may include other research students and departmental staff as well as staff and students from

outside your department and/or invited guests, or even audiences with a more complex make-up.

- Handling questions and criticisms from the audience.
- Managing nervousness.

All these challenges are discussed in the remainder of this chapter. Seek advice too from your supervisors and lecturers, other staff members and more advanced students. Many of them will be experienced speakers who have had to work through similar concerns.

Reworking a lengthy paper to present

Some graduates feel they have neither the time nor the inclination to rewrite a lengthy paper to accommodate reading for a specified time, and so decide to highlight certain parts of the paper to read and leave it at that. You may adopt this approach, or you may prefer to rework the paper. As it is impracticable here to include an example of a reworked paper, these few strategies for condensing are offered.

Condensing the material of your paper

Making your full paper available to the audience prior to a presentation will leave you in the enviable position of not having to provide detailed support for all that you say. So cut excessive detail, the very thing that can make the reading of a paper tedious, however imperative it is that such detail be included in the writing. While you can take liberties with evidence, referring the audience to your paper if more detail is requested, do be prepared to refer them to precisely where in your paper that detail can be found.

While you may wish to read some sections, you can break up the presentation by drawing on strategies of this type:

- **Condense** – for example, summarize a lengthy argument as key points on an overhead or slide, or isolate and list key issues to discuss.
- **Outline** – for example, model or picture the framework of your argument, theoretical discussion, experimental procedure, methodology.
- **Use graphical material** – for example, tables, graphs, figures, and drawings, to convey information succinctly.

Slideshow (PowerPoint) presentations

PowerPoint is the standard medium for slideshows, and may even be a mandatory requirement in your research area. Well done PowerPoint presentations are visually aesthetic and exude an aura of sophisticated professionalism.

Used by an audience-sensitive presenter, such presentations can be exciting and powerful. But not all is golden in this realm; presentations can also be boring for audiences, a complaint one hears too often.

Yale Professor Edward Tufte, who has published a monograph on the cognitive style of PowerPoint, notes (2003):

At a minimum, a presentation format should do no harm. Yet the PowerPoint style routinely disrupts, dominates, and trivialises content. Thus PowerPoint presentations too often resemble a school play – very loud, very slow, and very simple ... PowerPoint is a competent slide manager and projector. But rather than supplementing a presentation, it has become a substitute for it. Such misuse ignores the most important rule of speaking: Respect your audience.

A curious effect of this audience/content neglect is a type of memory stasis – the audience fails to remember anything much about the presentation 10 minutes later, which defeats the point of giving the presentation in the first place. Full critical appreciation of audience interests/needs as discussed at different points in this chapter is as vital as it is with other presentation formats. Where choice does exist, considering possibilities inherent in other formats covered above, should help you to decide whether PowerPoint is the best option given the specifics of your presentation situation. Study the next section as it contains many considerations that are applicable to presenting using PowerPoint.



key points

Mastery of the slideshow medium does not equate with a successful presentation.

Online slideshow options

Popular as PowerPoint is, students are also choosing to use online slideshow services to host and/or create their slideshows. Slideshare.net and Slide.com provide popular online platforms for hosting and displaying slideshows in PowerPoint, Keynote, pdf and other major formats. Uploading your presentation to one of these services provides you both with an online 'backup' (see → 'Backing up your work' in Chapter 1) and with a public platform for sharing your work and raising your profile (do not forget to tag your presentations so that people can find them).

Other tools allow you to create slideshow presentations in a non-linear, more flexible fashion. With Prezi.com and Vue.tufts.edu you can create

free-flowing slideshows that easily incorporate rich media. But again, be careful not to become besotted with the 'wow' factor of such tools: clarity of presentation must be your priority.

Pitfalls of using graphics

Watch that you do not fall into the trap of using graphics as a substitute for thoughtful content selection and structuring of your talk. This can lead to presenters failing to make critical connections, or including too much information for audience comfort, or zooming through graphics too fast, all of which can happen with PowerPoint presentations. It is frustrating for audiences to have a presenter show a complex table or figure that is information dense, only to have it whipped away before it can be read; or for the audience to realize that the print is too small to read; or for them to find that there is too much information to process and the speaker cannot manage this either; or to have a single table conveyed in eight slow-moving slides or bites of information so that the audience loses sight of the overall picture.

Slideshow technicalities

When designing and presenting a slideshow, consider the following points:

- Aim to **fill the frame** of each slide.
- In choosing **colours**, consider combining opposite colours on the colour spectrum for best effect. Do take care with reds and greens together as this combination might confound colour-blind people.
- Work towards **consistency** of design – for example, repeating colour and font sizes for different levels and types of information – in a set of slides. Your audience will soon tune in to the communicative meanings thus embodied.
- Experiment with **fonts**, as some are better than others. Courier New (as in the example below) gives good definition, as does Arial or Helvetica Neue. Avoid using all upper case letters, which are hard to read. It is important that people will be able to read your visuals:

Headings (about 34–36 point)

Sub-headings (about 28–32 point)

Text Of Visual (No Smaller Than 20 Point)

- Consider no more than about **five points** for the text of a slide. Condense information in each point so that the point itself consists of no more than 10–12 words.
- Ensure **graphic materials** (for example, tables, figures, diagrams, and maps) contain only essential information. If these are necessarily complex, be prepared to draw out in a concise way what is significant about them.

- Use abbreviations where your audience will understand these – this saves space.
- Consider incorporating **other media** (for example, rather than waiting while the audience reads, say, a lengthy quotation, include an audio recording of the quote to switch them to the listening mode).

If you are doing a slideshow presentation, be sure you **have a reliable backup** just in case something goes wrong. It is prudent to have a copy of your presentation on a hard drive (for example, your laptop), on a thumb drive, and also on a networked drive (for example, on the Internet in a service such as Slideshare.net or Dropbox.com, or even emailed to yourself).

You should save your presentation in pdf format. Pdf will ensure consistency in formatting, regardless of the version or brand of software available at the presentation facilities.

Fine-tuning and rehearsal

A key factor in the success of any presentation, including poster presentations, is meeting audience expectations in terms of their interests and processing needs, so give this matter close attention in both the design and delivery stages.

Encoding audience management

Essential to a successful presentation is effective audience management. Strategies for addressing the key aspects noted in Figure 11.2 can be encoded in the planning of your presentation.

Attracting audience interest

In all situations of presenting, you will need to work at attracting audience interest.

Enthusiasm Avoid seeming unenthusiastic about your topic (perhaps as an unfortunate effect of nervousness). Enthusiasm is indeed very catching, as



FIGURE 11.2 Key aspects of audience management

illustrated in this academic's opening comments to a broad general audience, who appeared riveted:

Science is sometimes mysterious, sometimes impenetrable, sometimes frustrating, usually hard work, and often hard work for little result. But science is always exciting. Fascinating and exciting.

Humour If it seems appropriate, and if you feel comfortable with it, build some humour into your talk. For example, an academic presenting to a broad academic audience began her talk by silently putting up an overhead of a humorous newspaper cartoon on a highly topical issue of the time regarding academic salaries (generating much laughter), and then said: 'I know you would all rather talk about this, but I'm going to talk about ...' She certainly caught the interest of her audience, and there was substance to follow.

Everyday analogies and metaphors These are great devices because they are easy for the audience to relate to. Take the engineer who began his rather technical talk by humorously detailing the types of structural mismanagement that would ensure collapse of the family home, and captivating his audience in the process.

Linking your paper to prior papers Another strategy is to link your conference paper to those presented prior to your own; even a few casual references in passing can be a useful way to engage, and re-engage throughout, the audience. This is particularly impressive where there is a conference theme, as it helps give a sense of continuity to ongoing presentations.

With **tutorial and seminar presentations**, remember not all people will be equally interested in your topic, so you may have to work a bit harder to generate audience interest. On a course, you will be guided in this by what you think will interest and stimulate students taking the same course as you. As a researcher, you could mention in your introduction how you think your paper might be relevant to the discipline as a whole, or how it complements work being done in other areas of the discipline. Ask yourself:

- Why might the advances I am making in my research interest members of the wider discipline? (You can assume that 'outsiders' have come precisely because they are interested in your topic.)

Orienting the audience to your talk

Start by thinking about these questions:

- What is my talk about?
- Why am I talking about this topic to this particular audience (return to your audience profile)?
- How will I approach the talk?

Build into your talk an overview of the paper you intend to present; keep it simple and clear. Remember that your audience is listening, not reading. Audience members are not able to backtrack, but instead rely on you to make the information easily accessible by adopting strategies of this type:

- Use an overhead/slide to outline or model the talk before you begin.
- Give the audience a written outline before you begin; keep this tight and compact.
- Circulate your paper the day before your presentation so that people have an opportunity to read it before your presentation. (Circulating a paper at the beginning of a presentation is not a good idea. People then tend to read the paper instead of listening to your talk, distracting both them and you. Sometimes, unfortunately, conference convenors request distribution of the paper at this point.)

Holding audience interest

Your audience is alert and listening – they know what your talk is about. Now, how will you hold their attention? In the main, try to remain sensitive to audience reactions, and consider the following strategies:

- **Let your eyes roam across the audience.** Make eye contact with many, not just one or two.
- **Modulate your voice,** change pace sometimes and pause for effect. Presenters often speak too fast. For a mixed audience of English and second-language speakers you should deliberately slow down, which is a good idea anyway. Speaking too fast can be a side effect of nervousness, which needs to be managed.
- **Speak up.** Make an effort to project your voice, particularly where there is no microphone. Audiences tend not to be forgiving of the softly spoken.
- **Alter the pitch of your voice** to avoid tonal monotony, which can be soporific or an incitement to daydream. Sometimes audiences do need a wake-up reminder and a change of pitch can achieve this.
- **Pause frequently.** Give the audience time to absorb your ideas, to have these implanted.
- **Summarize and recap** – look backwards and forwards – help the audience to remember and to follow. While redundancy or repetition is a negative in writing, it is a positive in presentations.
- **Try not to turn from the audience when speaking** to graphics (a big problem with slide-shows). A laser pointer might be available, but could be distracting if it is left to wander randomly as you glance up from your computer at the audience.
- If you notice someone snoozing in the audience, do not be thrown. Not all members will stay with you all of the time (particularly not those who have had a heavy night out!), but some may be completely engaged and listening intently.

Make reminder notes to yourself about all these matters on your paper or on prompt cards, particularly if you are prone to any of the above (for example, 'SPEAK UP').

The value of prior rehearsal

The value of a full rehearsal prior to presentation cannot be overemphasized. To manage time effectively, you will need to practise the delivery of your talk, preferably in front of an audience.

If you are located on campus, the best option is to get together with fellow students and borrow a room at your institution with the requisite equipment and other venue needs. Ask your lecturer/supervisor about this; it is usually possible for short periods. Fellow students can be very helpful in providing useful feedback before the official presentation takes place – remember to inform them about the nature of your audience, if needs be. A trial run can be relaxing and fun, alert you to the necessity for last-minute changes, help quell nervousness and increase confidence.

Family or friends might be willing audiences but, if you will be using equipment unavailable at home, you could be misled as to the effectiveness of your time management. Or, as a last resort, you could record yourself speaking your paper, and play it back so as to act as your own critic. But this is unlikely to give you a secure sense of how long it will take to deliver your paper, particularly if you will be moving between written text and visuals.

On the day: issues of delivery

By this stage you should be well prepared, rehearsed and brimming with confidence. But other issues may arise in relation to delivery.

The presenting venue

Whenever possible, visit in advance your venue for presentation. Look over the equipment and consider matters of this type:

- How big is the room? Will all audience members be able to hear if there is no microphone (do you need to get one?). Is the screen for visuals positioned so that those in the back row will be able to see it or does it need some adjustment?
- Will all your equipment needs be met and can you operate the equipment? Test equipment beforehand. It can throw your timing out if you have to fiddle with equipment to get it to work, and this can cause anxiety, though the audience is bound to be sympathetic. All equipment in the room may be operated from a complex panel, and there are differences in such panels. It will be disconcerting if the panel is one with which you are unfamiliar.

Dealing with the unexpected

Anything can go wrong with a presentation, and it often does: the equipment breaks down; or the room you are scheduled to speak in is changed at the last minute and you find it has no computer outlet for your PowerPoint presentation; or you realize you are running out of time and you have far from finished your talk; or a speaker on your panel has run way over time so your talk needs to be cut short on the spot; or the format of your panel session has been changed and you suddenly find you have less time to speak (it never seems to be more!).

As regards this last point, two useful strategies are:

1. Always think through beforehand how you might cut your paper short if you were to discover your speaking time had unexpectedly shrunk – actually mark out what you could cut without disturbing the overall coherence of your talk.
2. Learn your opening remarks by heart – not merely the polite or funny bits, but the intellectual lead-in. Do the same with your concluding remarks. A rambling conclusion or no conclusion because you are out of time can increase anxiety. Be able to cut straight to the conclusion if you run out of time.

You may have to make quick adjustments to cope with a new situation, but most presenters have had to confront the unexpected at some time, and are likely to feel sympathetic if this should happen. Draw your audience into your dilemma; make the best of the situation, and do not let it throw you off balance.

Canvassing audience questions

Question time often makes students nervous. It is easy to feel such relief at having finished your presentation that it is hard then to concentrate on questions. But do try to listen carefully because question time can be complex, as indicated by the situations mentioned below.

The belligerent or antagonistic question

Often the reasons behind aggressive questioning go beyond the scope of a paper, perhaps to a preferred ideology, theory or methodology, and there is little you can do except to respond if you can and move on quickly. Avoid engaging in argument in question time. Or, if your interest is aroused, offer to continue the conversation in a coffee or lunch break.

Uncertainty about what is being asked

Sometimes questioners are themselves uncertain about what it is they are really asking and so tend to be circuitous in putting questions. If you think there *are* questions being asked but you remain confused, ask politely for a rewording of the question(s), or for just one question at a time.

When you do not know the answer

You may be presenting work in progress that is incomplete, so you may not have all the answers. That aside, no one is infallible and it is easy to be caught out on occasion. You should admit you had not thought of that point and thank the questioner for drawing your attention to it. But be sure that the question is not simply irrelevant.

The irrelevant question

Some questions might be outside the scope of your paper, in which case just say so in your response. Or the question might imply the need for further research, beyond your scope, and you could say that. Or, if the question is more in the nature of a comment or observation of little relevance, then say so, or perhaps smile, nod and move on.

When there is not actually a 'question'

There can be a tendency for audience members to want to share their views and ideas rather than ask specific questions; others want to have their say. That is fine and can be interesting. But overlong, rambling speeches from audience members can be a problem too, unless there is a good Chair. When this happens, it might help to glance at a Chair who is not intervening, or you might have to politely intervene yourself to end the one-way 'conversation'.

Managing nervousness

Many presenters (students and academics alike) experience nervousness. Some nervousness is good – it keeps you alert and focused. But excessive nervousness can be terrible; all your careful preparation can collapse under a feeling of enormous strain.



key points

Take charge of your audience – lead them towards appreciation of your paper.

Be realistic

Try not to place impossible expectations on yourself. It really does not matter if your presentation is not perfect, if all does not go quite according to plan. Presentations rarely do, as seasoned presenters know well.

Think positively

Avoid engaging in self-sabotaging ‘inner talk’ of the type that predicts difficulties and failure – for example, ‘I’ve never been any good at presentations’, or ‘They’re going to hate my paper’. Instead, visualize your past successes and triumphs, your many past achievements – focus on a specific academic achievement that made you feel great.

Value your work

Remember that the conference convenors found your paper interesting enough to include. You do know a lot about your particular subject, and the audience can be persuaded that they want to hear what you want to tell them.

Keep your presentation in perspective

It is not the whole of your life, just a part of your overall academic endeavours at this time.

Nervousness usually decreases with further experience, but if you think the problem serious enough to warrant help, take steps to control it by contacting your counselling centre for professional advice. In the main, do not place impossible demands of perfection on yourself. Prepare well, do a practice run of your talk with fellow students if possible (help each other out), think positively, try to enjoy the opportunity to present, and do not be too concerned if everything does not go perfectly on the day – it rarely does.



further resources

Alley, M. (2003) *The Craft of Scientific Presentations: Critical Steps to Succeed and Critical Errors to Avoid*. New York: Springer-Verlag. An engaging, rich resource with great illustrations that is relevant for anyone who wants to master the slideshow medium and technical presentations.

Shephard, K. (2005) *Presenting at Conferences, Seminars and Meetings*. London: Sage Publications. A highly practical guide to presenting across disciplines that complements and expands on material covered in this chapter, and contains a chapter dedicated to a subject not discussed here: the advantages and disadvantages of videoconferencing.

Sprague, J. and Stuart, D. (2008) *The Speaker's Compact Handbook*. 2nd edn. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. More of an introduction to effective public speaking that provides essential information, great tips, checklists, learning tools (including speechbuilder express and infotrac), and discrete chapter access to specific topics of interest.