

Research your topic

- It is important that you know everything you possibly can about your topic; you must know all you can to support your argument in every way, and be ready to answer any and every question you are asked.
- It is important that your research is thorough to allow you to demonstrate your breadth of knowledge and, thus, your right to speak on it.
- Your greater knowledge will allow you to use a variety of persuasive strategies to strengthen and support your listener appeals. Find information in a library or get it from experts in the field, and remember that your own creative or reflective ideas are also an important part of your research.
- Find supportive visual information—slides, film or video material—which you can use to create atmosphere or illustrate content. Remember that this is also an important part of your research. (We will deal with the benefits of technology in detail later.)
- Find word-images and phrases to give life to your presentation and remember how important, and how supportive, simple statistics and real-life examples can be.
- Go back to the research phase, after you have completed the brainstorm procedure below, to fill in any gaps in your information that may be needed to support new aspects of the topic that you generate.

Brainstorm your topic

In brainstorming you generate, without being critical, all of the possible ideas which may be useful to your topic. After this initial flurry of activity, it is important that you gather your ideas and pull them together. There are a variety of strategies available for any particular topic, so don't limit yourself to your first choice: experiment with as many alternatives as you can think of. One very good choice, however, is to draw up a 'map of ideas' that represents your many ideas and visually lays out all the various ways that you could put them together. By choosing this approach to prepare, you are using all your stores of creative energy.

Suppose you want to present a plan to your human resources department to persuade the director that it is beneficial to have a

member of that department attached to every organisational unit. You draw up a map of ideas that looks something like Figure 4.1.

Evaluate and select

Keep all of the ideas from your brainstorming and evaluate them before you select from them. You can only start to evaluate and select when you have the clearest of pictures of the specific purpose of your presentation. These stages are among the most important in preparation. You evaluate which of your ideas have the most impact in the light of your purpose. You select from your ideas those that you can link to produce a coherent argument. You can eventually select those quotes and anecdotes that you can use to produce a strong introduction and conclusion, always remembering that these are the most important few moments of your presentation. Be strict with yourself in evaluation and selection. It is important, even if difficult, to develop an outline. Sacrifice those ideas that will not fit your topic or structure, and clearly lead your listeners.

Select carefully

Remember that your listeners recall at a rate inverse to the number of points made. Research shows that the more points you make, the fewer the details they remember. To test this idea, two professors (named Erskine and O'Morchoe)

taught one class only essential principles with little detail, and then compared their knowledge with another class which had been given a lot of details. The first class did better. Their conclusion was that too much material causes interference, and listeners remember less not more.²

Thus, remember your listeners and your listeners will remember you. Give them but a few points, but give those few points much life; give them anecdote and example (pegs on which listeners can hang their memories); give them entertainment (as long as it is pertinent); give them facts as illustration, not as the substance of your presentation. You can always write out details and large numbers of facts and present them as a follow-up handout.

Develop an outline

The selection process starts the next important stage of your preparation. Gradually, you can develop and fill out the detail of your speech by drawing on your knowledge of your listeners, the situation and the topic. You will begin, in these important stages, to outline your presentation clearly. Your initial written outline may quite fully state your main points and sub-points, placing them in order. The steps of preparation are not mutually exclusive and you will find yourself going back and forth between your research, your selection and your structure to find the best solutions. Because preparation is not a straightforward process, you should respond to your good ideas as they arise. If you suddenly come up with a new angle on a topic, consider its usefulness; if it fits, do not be afraid to adjust what you have already developed.

Structure your topic

Deciding how to structure your presentation is perhaps the most difficult aspect of preparation, and we examine it in detail in the next chapter. We believe that the structure of your speech is most important, and you must carefully structure your message to take advantage of your speaking opportunity. Remember that the listener will always be looking for structure, and will struggle if you do not provide it. If you provide a clear structure, the listener can keep up with you as you progress through the speech. Generally, a speaking structure has three sections: the introduction, the body and the conclusion. The introduction and conclusion are very important parts of your speech, and you should put aside some of your best ideas from the selection stage to consider as possibilities to bring zest to your beginning and ending.

The introduction

Structure your introduction to capture your listeners' attention. Remember, your listeners will decide in the first thirty seconds what they think of you and whether or not you are worth listening to. Once you have their attention, you give them direction: outline the map of your ideas and, thus, the structure of your presentation. The old maxim is worth recalling here: 'Tell them what you are going to say, say it, then tell them what you have said.'

James Humes, the speechwriter of US Presidents, drives home this truth when he says, 'If being repetitious is a *vice* in an article it is a *device* in a speech.'

The body

What is the right amount of information for a listener to comprehend? Because it is difficult for listeners to process too much information, you should select only two main points in a ten-minute presentation and four main points for a twenty-minute presentation. You can, of course, and should, present sub-points to support these main points, but limit them to three or four for each main point.

Remember, if you are speaking for more than twenty minutes, you need to add variety to your presentation by using a range of techniques, such as questions or visuals, to alter the rhythms of your interaction and so help your listeners maintain concentration. Work on this in your preparation. One of the most common faults in presentations is to include too much information. Winston Churchill fainted when he was making his maiden speech in the House of Commons. He later claimed that it was because he had decided to detail all of the world's problems in one speech and the effort overcame him. Later, as an experienced speaker, he emphasised the importance of one clear theme in a presentation. Know your theme and develop your material to support it.

The conclusion

Your conclusion must sum up, and strikingly, the theme of your presentation. A good presentation is one that listeners can later recount to friends in just a sentence or two. In a persuasive presentation, there will often be some action that you need to suggest to your listeners. Most importantly, a good conclusion does not linger; it is brief and to the point. We will give some examples to guide you when we look at structure in more detail in the next chapter.

BE CREATIVE

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will make it engrossing? What will make it memorable for your listeners? What creative elements can you include? What words can you use? What images will you leave with your listeners?

To make your point, you could use:

- visuals in the forms of photos, pictures, slides, charts or graphics on overheads
- music or voice-overs of other experts to add to the aural experience
- role-play or dialogue.

Your creative ideas should always serve the purpose of your presentation, not distract from it. We once had a student who began her presentation on fitness by getting us all to run on the spot and then take our own pulses before she told us what rate a fit pulse should be. A number of listeners registered some shock at the pace of their pulse and became immediately more motivated to listen. This was a creative way of making certain that her listeners were aware that her presentation applied to their personal fitness.

Find examples, words and images

In this preparation stage, spend time exploring the possibilities of the language to get full value out of your presentation. For example, using an analogy can help people to think about an old idea in new ways. You must never speak in abstract terms: always use concrete example and analogy to make your point strongly. You might create a character and relate your topic to that character's life to make it seem more real for the listeners. A real character or a fictional character, whichever serves your purpose best, will bring your presentation to life. Create as many images as you can in words, as well as in visual forms. Word images, as we know from Shakespeare's plays, can be as powerful as visual images. Explore the possibility of a powerful sentence which emphasises your point, and think of repeating it to clarify your theme and to cement it in the memories of your listeners. If your presentation requires a certain style of language—for example, a simplification of terms for lay listeners—then consider those simple terms at this stage of your preparation. Consider also those phrases or words which will express your ideas clearly and pertinently, and write them down.