



Presentation Skills Training Course

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1 - Introduction

At some stage in their lives, most people are faced with having to stand up in front of a group and make a presentation. For some, this is a natural part of their working or social life; they may even look forward to it. For others it is a nerve racking experience which fills them with dread.

This course is designed for all those who have to make presentations and who would like to enhance their skills. By the end of the course each participant will be able to:

- Prepare effectively for a presentation.
- Design and structure a presentation to achieve their objective.
- Use visual aids to enhance their presentations.
- Deliver presentations more effectively.
- Keep better control of their nerves.
- Make a better impression.

The skills of presenting are not unique to any presentation. All presenters use the same set of skills and techniques whether they are a television compere, a management trainer, a sales person, a manager, or captain of golf club. They may use the skills slightly differently, but they are the same skills.

These skills can be grouped under two main headings; preparation and delivery. The preparation stage includes all the thought and work that goes in before the presentation is made - planning what you are going to say and how you are going to say it, preparing visuals and notes, etc. Delivery deals with your voice, body language, nerves, etc.



2 - Preparation

Failing to prepare is preparing to fail. This is probably more true of making presentations than any other activity. Nobody, not even a professional presenter will make a good presentation without adequate preparation. It is the foundation of all presentations and is the primary weapon in the fight against your nerves.

Preparation involves a series of distinct stages which you should follow. Some of these stages involve only a little thought but you should still make sure to go through them, they are all part of the process.

Objectives

The first question you have to answer in your preparation is why you are making the presentation at all. There will be a general objective as well as a specific objective relating to the subject matter. General objectives will fall into one of the following categories:

- To persuade or sell
- To teach
- To stimulate thought
- To inform
- To entertain

Whatever your general objective, you always need to try and entertain your audience. This means putting your material over in such a way that it is interesting and people want to listen.

The specific objective will depend entirely on your subject matter. You should always write down your specific objective in one sentence and try to phrase it in terms of what your audience will *do* after your presentation.



This has various benefits:

- It focuses your mind right at the start.
- Selection of material is based on achieving the objective.
- When your notes are complete you can again check that you are meeting your original aim.
- You may be able to test whether your objective has been achieved by what the audience do after your talk.

It is possible to have more than one specific objective, but be careful that this does not muddle your thinking and, therefore, your presentation.



3 - Knowing the Logistics of the Presentation

a) Audience

Anyone who has sat through a presentation and wondered if they are in the right room will know the importance of researching your audience. The audience you are talking to are the most important people in the whole exercise. You need to know:

- How many of them are there?
- Who are they?
- What do they know about the subject?
- What is their attitude to the subject, to you and to your objective?
- Why are they there?
- What are their expectations and needs?

All the above points will determine the material used and the approach to the presentation. You have a duty to those who listen to you to make sure your talk is pitched at the right level for them.

b) Venue

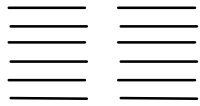
It is important to consider where the presentation is going to take place. There may not always be a choice of venue, but it is very useful to see it beforehand, especially if you have not spoken there before. The ideal venue is:

- Quiet and without distractions like picture windows, noise, interruptions, etc.
- Large enough for your audience.
- Equipped with the facilities you and your audience will need.
- Comfortable, but not too comfortable.
- Laid out in a way which suits you, your audience and your objective.



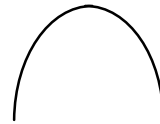
c) Seating Layout

Seating layouts can vary enormously and again; there may be no control over the layout. The following are a few of the many variations possible - there are advantages and disadvantages to each.



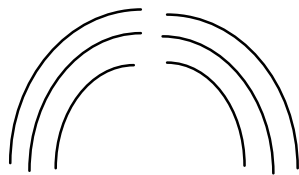
Theatre Style

People sit in rows. Most common with large audiences. Formal atmosphere and eye contact with audience more difficult to achieve



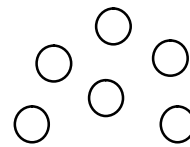
Horseshoe or "U"

Single row of people arranged in a horseshoe shape. Informal and conducive to participation



Curved Rows

Similar problems as with Theatre Style but slightly less formal



Cabaret Style

People sitting in groups around a table. Useful if you want to break the audience into formal discussion groups

Note that people have a great tendency to sit at the back of rooms if given the choice. Ideally you want the audience as near as possible. The environment you have to speak in can either hinder or help. The aim is to minimise the hindrances and maximise the good points.



d) Timing

Knowing how long you have to speak is important. Too often speakers drone on long after the expected finishing time. The time of day at which you will speak is also important.

Time of day can affect you and the audience. After lunch is known as the graveyard shift among trainers. Audiences who have had a good lunch will probably feel more like taking an afternoon nap rather than listening to you.

They may also be getting tired. People's ability to concentrate for long periods is not good. Concentration levels over a two-hour period look something like this:

When listening to a talk concentration is usually fairly good for the first 20 minutes or so. For some people, it can be as short as five minutes. After that, maintaining concentration gets harder and harder until they hear the magic words 'in conclusion'. Concentration improves slightly at that point in anticipation of the end of the presentation.

You, too, have good and less good times of the day. Some people are better first thing in the morning, others late in the afternoon. If you find speaking to groups a nerve-racking experience, it can be wise to try and find a time of day when you feel physically and mentally able to cope with the task.



4 - Structure

Having defined your objective, identified and researched your audience, organised or researched the venue and found out how much time you have and when, it is now time to consider what you are going to say.

Any talk will almost certainly fail unless careful thought is given to the content. Unstructured, rambling talks tend to be difficult to concentrate upon and unless the main points are made very clear for the audience, the message will be forgotten quickly.

The structure of any talk is quite simple; there is a beginning, a middle and an end:

- Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em.
- Tell 'em.
- Tell 'em what you've told 'em.

Each serves a different purpose and each is essential for a good presentation. The following stages will help through the preparation of the material and ensure that your presentation is well structured and interesting.

Middle

The first part of a presentation to prepare is not the beginning, but the middle. This is the substance of the presentation; the beginning and end will follow easily if the middle is well prepared. The key work about the middle is 'logical'. It must flow in a logical sequence, from your audience's point of view.



Preparing a Logical Sequence of Ideas

Step One Brainstorm as many ideas as possible and get them down on paper. Don't worry about the order or any finer details, just get as many ideas down on paper as possible. A useful technique for doing this is by making pattern notes. Pattern notes enable the brain to relate to information far more naturally and efficiently, by forming an interrelated pattern rather than a list. Pattern notes are also easy to do.

- Take a plain sheet of paper. Write your objective on the top and the specific objective or theme in the centre of the page
- Write down all the ideas and thoughts you have on the subject, starting from the centre and branching out along lines of connecting ideas.
- Don't restrict yourself and don't make any attempt to put them in order.

Once your pattern notes are complete, leave them aside for a while. When you return to them you may have thought of other ideas.

Step 2. List your main points in logical sequence.

Step 3. Transfer and tidy your pattern notes into a 'tree' based on the sequence.

Step 4. Decide how much you are going to say. You will probably have far more points than you can use. It is important to keep the number of points to a minimum. Depending on the topic, one point every five to ten minutes is plenty. This may not seem very many, but if you are to leave the audience with a very clear picture of what you have said, you cannot expect them to remember masses of points. Selecting the material you are going to use should be based on the objective, the audience and the time available. Sometimes it makes sense to select on the basis of what you must say to achieve your objective, what the audience should know and what it would be nice for them to know. This step is one of the hardest. It is always tempting to tell people everything you know about a subject, especially if it is one you know well.



When trying to persuade people (which will frequently be the case) it is useful to consider the following approach

- State your proposal or what you want them to do.
- Anticipate objections - concede any flaws in the argument, it takes the sting out of any criticism and makes you appear open and honest. Even if you do not express the weaknesses out loud, it is important to identify what they might be and select your material accordingly.
- Prove your case - select your best reasons for your proposition. Do not overload your talk with lots of reasons. Quality is better than quantity.
- Show your evidence. Build in practical examples of the facts you are relying on.
- Anticipate the worst. Prepare answers for the questions you would least like to be asked.
- End by repeating your proposition.

Whenever you speak to a group of people you are competing with their own vivid imaginations. When you are listening to people talk, you can easily find yourself drifting off into your own little world.

Most people have mental pictures in their minds. As a speaker, you need to talk in pictures and give them to your audience rather than let them drift off into their own. This often means simplifying confusing ideas or figures into something concrete and real. Use examples that are pitched in terms your audience understands and finds relevant.

Finding examples is crucial where the subject is basically boring. You do not always have exciting subjects to talk about. However, careful thought can usually yield suitable illustrations from your own experiences.



Beginning

- The beginning serves to tell the audience what to expect and should contain:
- Something to capture the attention of the audience immediately.
- Showing the audience why they need to listen to what you have got to say. What is the relevance to them?
- An introduction to you and a justification of why you are qualified to speak to them. You have to gain credibility at the very beginning.
- An introduction to the subject and how you are going to approach it.
- The logistics of the presentation. How long it will be, whether there will be breaks, where the toilets are, etc.
- How you will handle questions - during the presentation, at set points or at the end.
- You may also want to introduce your objective (or not)

End

At the end of the presentation, you need to remind the audience of the main points by summarising your talk. You should also tell them what is going to happen next if there is some follow on from the presentation.

The closing section of your talk should be just that. It should be conclusive. It should not drift to a halt with words like "I think that's all I've got to say". Remember that what you say last is the thought you leave with your audience. Therefore, if you want to stimulate them into some action, you should tell them what to do next.



5 - Using Visual Aids

It is important to consider using visual aids because:

- They break the whole thing up, which is very useful in long presentations.
- They are visual - a different activity for the audience from passive listening and it offers a different means of presenting information which some will find easier to absorb.
- They can help illustrate complex information in a simplified way.

There are many different types of visual aid you can use but in every case they should be:

Big Clear Add Value

They should always be big enough to be easily seen and read from anywhere in the room. This usually means making them bigger than we normally would. They should be clear - no muddle, no clutter, plenty of empty space. They should add value to the presentation. There is no point in having visuals just because you were told to use them. They should add something. As far as possible, they should be pictorial and visual - that's their strength.

Visuals can be broken down into two broad groups from the presenter's point of view: those that have to be prepared in advance and those that are created during the presentation. The pre-prepared types include:

Slides Projector slides are very high quality but need a darkened room. Are also inflexible in terms of changing the sequence or making adjustments to content as the presentation unfolds. Expensive.

Overhead projector More flexible than slides. Can alter sequence and skip ones which are not applicable.



- Video** Very effective but very limited choice. Very hard to find or make the 'right' video for a presentation.
- Models** Physical items as examples or demonstrations. Very effective if you are talking about a piece of machinery, for example, to have one there for everybody to examine.

The visuals which are developed during the presentation include all types of boards and flip charts. These have the advantage of being very flexible and enable you to customise your visuals to the particular audience. However, your hand writing and drawing must be good and should be practised.

Whatever visuals you choose to use, the following guidelines apply:

- Always plan the visuals to complement your talk but never rely on them completely. Always be prepared for the worst. If your visuals can't be used, you must be able to talk without them.
- Keep visuals simple. Use much less information than you would on the printed page and make text and pictures much bigger than normal.
- Limit the number of visual aids you use and don't use too many different kinds. Only use them if they add value, not just for the sake of using them.

When using visual aids, always give the audience time to look at them before you start talking about the contents - people can't read and listen at the same time. When you have finished with a visual, remove it. Don't allow it to remain in sight and act as a distraction.

Never talk to your visual aids. Stay facing the audience. Do not point to the screen with your arms. If you want to highlight particular points, use a pointer with slides. With an overhead projector, use a pencil or pointer on the projector itself, not the screen.

Use black pen when writing and write in large block capitals. Stand in front of the board or flip chart when writing otherwise your lines will form a semi-circle.



Notes

Notes are a vital element in your preparation. Even if you are very familiar with what you are going to say, even if you know it off by heart, you should still have notes. They are your insurance policy if the worst comes to the worst and your mind goes blank. This is the worst thing that can happen to a presenter and notes give you a quick and easy way of recovering from it. They also act as a guide to help you make sure that you say what you intend and in the right order.

Notes should be brief and consist of key words. They should not contain your talk word for word – you are going to say it, not read it. They are just reminders and should be used as such. Therefore, they should be easy to read without interrupting the flow of your talk. This means that your notes should be big and bold, containing just enough words to act as prompts. If you have too much in your notes, they become useless because you can't find where you are in your notes.

You can also write prompts in your notes. These might relate to the use of visuals, timing, or messages to yourself about how you present, e.g. look at them, speak slowly, etc.

Your notes can be in any format you find comfortable, but consider the use of cards. They don't shake as much as sheets of paper if you are nervous; they can be held quite easily; and since they are smaller, they will encourage you to use key words rather than sentences.

If you are using cards, number them and clip them together with rings or treasury tags.

You must have notes, and you should use them, no matter how experienced you are or how confident.

Handouts

You may also consider giving notes to the audience. Unless you want them to make use of the handout during the presentation, it is better to give any written material out at the end. Otherwise, some of your audience will read the material rather than listen to you.



6 - Rehearsal

It may seem strange to suggest rehearsal for a presentation, but it is a performance and like any actor, you must prepare yourself. Rehearsal has a number of benefits:

- It makes you think about how you are going to make the various points - what words you are going to use.
- It ensures that there is a logical flow. It is not uncommon to change the sequence of your presentation as a result of rehearsal.
- It helps you make sure that you have a way of linking the various points.
- It allows you to think of examples, anecdotes, etc. to illustrate your talk.

If you are new to presenting, rehearsal is best done out loud, in front of a mirror. You can also practice on your friends and relations. As you become more experienced, your rehearsal can take place in your head.



7 - Delivery

Having done all this work in preparing your presentation, it should in theory be easy to get up and deliver it. Not so! There are various important aspects to consider about how you put your message across.

Although our basic communication medium is words, it is surprising how little contribution to the message they have on their own. Research reveals the percentage contribution to the total message is:

Words	less than 10%
Tone of voice	about 40%
Body language	about 50%

Words

The words used will be determined by the audience. Only use jargon in its rightful place. It is a marvellous shorthand for those who understand it, but is should never be used with those who don't. Be aware of the problems involved in words. They can mean different things to different people depending on their background, where they are from, etc.

Use concrete, simple language. Talk in sentences. A talk which is strung together with ands, buts and ifs can be very difficult to follow.

Voice

Your voice is the primary vehicle for your words and must be effective. A good presenter's voice is:

- **Clear** - try to make sure that your words do not run into one another. Practice enunciating words to separate the syllables.
- **Loud enough** - Make sure your are loud enough for everyone in the room. Project your voice by speaking to the person who is farthest away from you.
- **Modulated** - most speakers of the English language tend to use only two or three tones of the musical scale. Speech is more meaningful when we use plenty of range of tone. Practice increasing your range and making your voice move up and down like a piano scale.



- **Well paced** - speed of speech is measured by the number of words per minute. Speech is more interesting when the speed is varied. If your average speed is too slow, your listeners become bored and impatient. If your average speed is too fast, they don't have time to take in what you are saying and again lose interest.
- **Phrased** - the unit of speech is the phrase. It is in the moments of silence between phrases, however small, that the listener interprets the meaning. See that phrases are separated by pauses to allow your meaning to sink in.

Speaking to an audience is not the same as holding a conversation. Like any performer, you need to exaggerate your voice. This is done through:

- **Enunciation.** Practice exaggerated and deliberate enunciation.
- **Expression.** The amount of emphasis you place on particular words will focus attention on important points. You can show how enthusiastic you are by injecting expression into what you are saying. If you are not enthusiastic about your subject, you can hardly expect your audience to be.
- **Pausing.** Do not be afraid of pausing. You do not have to rush through it all like an express train. Give your audience time to take in a digest what you are saying. Certainly pause after the main points of your talk.

Don't be afraid to exaggerate your speech patterns, to ham it up. You have to go quite a long way before you are in danger of going over the top.

Body

A quite outstanding contribution to your message is made by all those things you do not actually say: the way you stand, the gestures you use, whether you look miserable or happy. The key elements of body language for a presenter are:

- **Look at your audience** - This may be very hard to do but it is essential. Eye contact is vital in order to maintain audience interest in what you have to say and helps to project an image of confidence. You also need to look at them to see how they are reacting. When the audience stops looking at you, they are probably not listening. If people are arranged around you, you must make sure you look at the people on the extreme right and left and not just those in front of you.



- **Smile** - Again quite hard to do. Even if you are not particularly happy, smiling can create the illusion that you are. It is also surprising how very often the audience smile back. Smiling also has the added benefit of relaxing your vocal chords which can make your voice sound more interesting.
- **Stand square** - Find a comfortable stance facing your audience. Try to avoid leaning up against furniture or holding on to things e.g. curtains, flip chart stands, etc.
- **Control your hands** - Beware of distracting mannerisms. This does not mean standing rigid. Most of us use our hands to some extent to add emphasis to what we are saying, and we should not stop doing this. However, waving your arms around all over the place is likely to distract the audience. Anything which may distract is to be avoided. The audience becomes hooked on them and will concentrate on them rather than listening. Keep your hands out of your pockets and don't hold anything in your hands you will play with it unconsciously. Verbal mannerisms, e.g. er, um, OK, etc. have the same effect.
- **Avoid barriers** - You need to get as near to your audience as possible. Standing behind a desk or lectern immediately sets up a barrier. It is always tempting to hide behind something, but is undesirable.



8 - Nerves

A common reaction to being asked to speak to a group is one of sheer terror. It is one of the top ten human fears, along with heights and spiders. You are not alone. Do not be fooled, however, into thinking that nerves disappear once you have become used to speaking to groups. They do not and they should not.. When you are nervous your adrenaline flows. This helps to key you up to deal with problem situations. What you have to do is use that adrenaline to help your presentations.

The other important fact of life is that however nervous or shaky you may feel inside, the audience hardly ever notices. People will only notice if you start behaving unnaturally. The following suggestions may help you overcome your nerves:

- **Prepare thoroughly.** Good preparation provides a sense of confidence and a degree of security. It also takes time; make sure you allow sufficient.
- **Positive attitude.** If you think the audience will react in a hostile way, it is easy to become defensive. Defensiveness is one of those characteristics that can easily come over in tone of voice and body language. The audience will then react on that basis and may well become hostile. However, if you think the audience is going to like what you have to say, they probably will because you will be giving off the right signals.
- **Get used to the venue.** Stand where you are going to speak and get used to the 'feel' of the room. Try out your voice and get used to the sound of it.
- **Exercise.** Relaxation and deep breathing can help. Note that shallow breathing during a presentation can lead you to be short of breath and volume.
- **Consider the audience.** They are probably quite nice people really. They are not usually out for blood. It may feel like that but most people do not want to see you fail. It is quite possible to exude an air of confidence even if you don't feel it.



9 - The Presentation

At last the day of the presentation arrives. You have prepared everything, you are confident in your knowledge and your preparation. Now all you have to do is stand up and deliver it. Well, not quite. First you must do your checks.

Check

Arrive in plenty of time and check everything. This includes:

- The room layout
- The equipment. Does everything work? Overhead projectors, paper for flip charts, markers, etc.
- The room environment. Temperature, ventilation, noise, etc.
- Logistics. Tea, coffee, lunch, loos, exits, etc.
- Your visuals. Walk around the room and make sure that they can be seen from every seat. Also work out where you can stand and move without obstructing the visuals.
- Yourself. Go to the toilet and check that zips, buttons, etc. are done up, tie is straight, hair and makeup are in place, etc.

Again, the better you have checked, the more confident you will be that things are going to go well.

Pace

When you give a presentation, there is a great tendency to rush through it, to get it over with. This risks losing your audience. Slow yourself down, particularly at the very beginning, and watch the audience. If they are showing signs of boredom it may be necessary to speed up your delivery. This doesn't necessarily mean talking faster, but speeding up the rate at which you introduce your points.

It is always better to start your presentation at a level that is slightly below what you expect of the audience. It is always possible to increase the level later but very difficult to lower the level after you have lost the audience.



Managing the Presentation

There are many ways open to you to vary the way you actually approach your subject. In longer talks, audience participation can be helpful in overcoming the concentration problem.

You might be able to split the audience into groups, ask them to discuss a particular topic and report back to the whole group. This is particularly useful in a training context.

Participation, however, does have some disadvantages for the presenter, particularly for the inexperienced presenter. Firstly, it takes more time because more people are talking. Secondly, and more importantly, it can become very difficult to control. Unless you are very confident of your ability to chair and manage a discussion, a lecture style with questions at the end is more likely to be successful.



10 - Handling Questions

There are good reasons for inviting questions from the audience. The main one is that it helps contribute towards the message being understood. If one person asks a question about some aspect they are not clear on, it will help everyone else in the audience.

It is important to tell people there will be an opportunity to ask questions at the end. As they listen, questions may occur to them and they can save them up. When the question session arrives, it must be handled well.

Techniques for Handling Question Sessions

- Do not expect questions to come immediately after you stop talking. You are asking the audience to take on a different role and they may need a few moments to think of the questions they want to ask.
- When a question is asked, repeat it so the everyone in the room knows what is being answered.
- Answer as concisely as you can, don't ramble on.
- If you do not know the answer, say so. Never bluff, you will be caught out. Ask if anyone else knows.
- Take questions from all over the room, not just from those who talk a lot.
- If the question is not clear, rephrase it and check.
- If the questioner is hostile, ask them to answer their own question.

There are three types of question: relevant, peripheral and irrelevant. Answer the relevant ones fully. Answer the peripheral ones very briefly and refuse to answer the irrelevant ones on the basis that they are not pertinent to today's presentation.



11 - Evaluation

In any activity it is important to evaluate performance. This is the only way in which strengths and weaknesses can be identified and plans made to improve things in the future. Presenting is no exception.

Evaluating your performance can seem like a very threatening exercise but approached properly it gives you the tools to improve. There are a number of sources of feedback on your performance:

- Your own impressions. You will have some idea how well you presented. Note that this has a tendency to be strongly biased positively or negatively.
- Asking people you know. There may be people you know and trust in the audience. Ask them for an honest assessment.
- Asking the audience. There are a number of ways of doing this - the evaluation sheets that trainers use, asking publicly for feedback and asking privately for feedback.
- Results. The ultimate evaluation of any presentation is whether it achieved its objective. Did the audience do what you wanted?

Get into the habit of evaluating your performance but don't allow it to become a negative spiral which undermines your confidence.

