

Preparing For An Oral Presentation

Ian Benest

COMMUNICATE

An oral presentation is one way of communicating ideas to a number of people at the same time. Communication is the keyword here; before you can communicate new ideas, new processes, etc., you must ensure that the majority present understand the general (technical) knowledge that underpins the work about which you're going to talk. This is why the first rule is: "know your audience". Ask the organiser for a description of the audience. Remember, while you are familiar with the work, the audience may only have a superficial understanding, so you will need to spend time reminding them of the relevant material that underpins the main body of your talk.

When you make a presentation, it is your work, be proud of it, be enthusiastic, get the audience excited, get them on your side. Smile. Put your shyness to one side, get them engaged, keep them engaged.

PLANNING

- How long is your talk? A 15 minutes slot usually means 10 minutes talk, 5 minutes questions.
- How many visual slides do you need? There is no hard and fast rule, but 1 minute a slide is a good starting point. However, your title slide will not require that long. Do you need slides?
- What media will you have available? PowerPoint is now the standard medium. PDF is another possible format. What if the computer fails? Both routes can generate OHP transparencies.
- Are you thinking of presenting a program and its interface? Try not to, they are often seen to take a long time to get started even if you have it already running behind your slides – it takes time to move windows on the screen and the text displayed by a program is often too small to be comfortably seen by most of the audience.
- How long have you got to get organised? If you know more or less what you are going to say, then start at least 1 week before you are going to speak. Everyday for that week, give the lecture to yourself several times. If you have to do some research/thinking/reading before you put your talk together then allow more than a week.

ORGANISE

- Your talk should have an introduction that outlines what you're going to talk about; you might say why you're going to talk about it, and why the audience is going to benefit from the talk; give them a reason for listening to you.
- Have a middle which is the most substantial part of the talk. Remember to explain. Remember that the detail is in the accompanying paper/report, so you are giving the essence of what you want your audience to appreciate, and helping them cope with the report when they read it.
- Remember that most of your audience will not be as familiar with the material as you are. What now seems obvious to you will not be so obvious to the audience.
- Have a summary or a set of conclusions; what has the audience gained from listening to you?
- Use animation, where it communicates something that is hard to do with words, but do it slower than you can press the stepping button – remember the animation itself is communicating, as is the diagram at each step. Generally, keep things simple.
- A talk longer than twenty minutes requires a break, a change in pace, a review of what has been explained so far, where are you going next in your exposition and why. Take time, help the audience, you want them to stay with you.

PREPARATION FOR THE DAY

- The first slide is a title slide, with your name and organisation. The next slide is usually a "contents" slide outlining the structure of your talk. There follows the slides that support the bulk of your talk, then a conclusions slide, followed by a slide with "Thanks, questions...".
- The text on your visual aids must be comfortably readable from the back of the auditorium by someone with normal eyesight. The installed projector will be suitable for the size of the auditorium, so try out your slides in a local large lecture theatre. View from the back of the auditorium, no squinting! Can you read all your slides comfortably? Do you have normal eyesight (corrected with glasses if need be)? Does the projector "wash-out" the colours you have adopted? Use a clean font: plain (for the bulk), italic (for emphasis) and bold (for headings). Black text on a pale colour provides the necessary contrast – avoid blue text, and avoid a white background. Remember, there will be some in your audience with colour deficiency, poor eyesight and other visual problems. Long lines are uncomfortable to read as are lines with a small space between them. How do you like reading this document? The lines are too closely spaced!
- Use words on the slides that you will use when speaking, so as to provide visual/aural reinforcement. But don't just read the slides to the audience.
- Include sufficient text so that the audience can go through the slides after your talk and remember what you said. This also allows members of the audience to "catch-up" with your story-line should their mind wander for a few seconds during your talk. This is quite normal. People have a limited attention span which declines as the number of speakers grows, and the auditorium gets hotter and stuffier. Slides should be visually straightforward.
- Generally, colour is aesthetically pleasing, and certainly preferred over black and white. But make sure you are not colour deficient, before you "colourise" your slides.
- Relevant colour images can enliven a "light" presentation, but they can get in the (visual) way of a technical exposition. There is no hard and fast rule, it depends on your topic. But remember, if your slides are going to be made available to the outside world, the copyright of all images are held by their creator and you cannot use them without their permission.
- Diagrams are often more expressive than words, but make sure the audience can see them comfortably and read the text annotations. Check in the lecture theatre.
- Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse – time yourself, are you within the scheduled time? You might have to add extra (and useful) detail to use up the time; generally you find you have too much to say in the time and you have to prune. Often you run faster on the day. Rehearse over a number of days and over a number of times each day. Do not wait until the night before to rehearse.
- Write down in big letters those statements you have difficulty saying. Have these on the lectern so that the audience cannot see that you are reading them. But only do it for statements you fluff. If you are having difficulty remembering the order of what you are going to say, then bullet point keywords on a card as a memory jogger; but don't write too much. Practise using the cue cards.
- If you can video yourself, do so, then watch the video. It will probably not be a pleasing experience, but you will see yourself as others see you. Many people are very self-critical – you're not as bad as you think you are. Otherwise, ask someone who will be constructively critical to listen to you practise and ask them to comment.
- Consider what questions might be asked and think of good succinct answers.
- If your first language is English and you're speaking at an overseas conference in English, remember to speak slower than you normally do in the UK. This means you cannot cover so much material. But at the end most of the audience will have appreciated what you said.
- Generally, do not make the audience participate, do not ask them to respond to questions. If you must, then practise with an audience before hand, so that you know what the reaction will be.
- Pauses allow the audience to digest what you have just said. They can signal a separation of ideas. Changing slides is an opportunity to pause, to announce a change in topic. Use linguistic markers ("and now we turn to...").
- Point out those aspects you are coming back to later in the talk. Point out those things that are crucial for understanding your message.
- If you are going to ad-lib (orally or visually), practise before hand! Time it.
- If you are going to demonstrate an artefact, go through the demonstration many times not just in your mind, but physically go through it. Remember, every identical computer system is different!

- If you are going to be controversial, give a warning before hand.
- Learn to project your voice to the back of the room. Practise not tailing off at the end of a sentence. Keywords and key points should be spoken with emphasis.
- If you are going to have to use a lapel microphone, keep your head still and face your front. Practise. If you need to use a single microphone at the lectern, you have to stay there.

ON THE DAY

- Come early and check the auditorium: which side are you going to stand, is there something you are going to bump into as you move around (if so, move it)? If there is no table or lectern to stand behind, will you feel vulnerable? Get the stage altered if it is going to have a negative impact on your performance.
- Start when you are ready. Introduce yourself at the start, where are you from. It helps you settle into your talk and it prepares the audience.
- Finish with: "And that concludes my talk, thanks for listening, are there any questions". Don't just stop.
- Be enthusiastic. Face the audience. Look at, or look through, the audience.
- Speak clearly, do not mumble, open your mouth when you speak.
- Keep to time, but do not set PowerPoint to change automatically at a specific time. Slide changes reinforce what you are saying. Together they signal a change in topic: "that's finished with that, now it's on to this next point"; it helps the audience to realise your structure (but use keywords and phrases for "that" and similarly for the "next point").
- Stand behind the lectern to reduce the feeling of exposure, but only if you really need to, otherwise stand proud in front of the audience. The lectern/front table can hold your notes so if you need access to them, position yourself within easy reach. Make sure you have sorted out what you are going to do before hand, otherwise your timing will be adversely affected.
- Moving about the stage can keep an audience engaged; it can also irritate if it is done to excess.
- Rather than ask the audience if they know about X and expect a show of hands, just remind everyone gently about X, sufficient to support your message. Goading an audience into full participation is a specialised skill that needs a great deal of practice; it can, of course, make for a most enjoyable talk. The effortless way in which comedians control an audience is done only after a huge amount of rehearsal. An effective alternative is to pose rhetorical questions regularly which, after a short pause, you answer on behalf of the audience. It is even more effective if you are aware of what everyone is wondering just before you ask the question; it is very stimulating.
- Being too well rehearsed can cause you to go "on auto-pilot"; you go too fast. A little nervousness keeps you dynamic. Make sure your preparation peaks you for the day of the talk.
- Make it a "performance" – make the audience happy: both for those who know what you are talking about and for those whose interest is peripheral to your topic.
- Accept critical questions gracefully, avoid an argument, most of the audience will be with you.
- Do not "put down" a questioner, if you do, much of your audience will be against you!
- Precision in content is most important, precision in style is less so, simply because humans are so adaptable and so variable in what they like.

AND FINALLY (WELL ALMOST)

Sometimes a conference will request that you bring a written script to be used by human translators so that some of the audience can hear what you say in their own language. You must keep to the script. Write the script in conversational language: use common words, and no convoluted sentences. Practise reading the script as if you were saying it from memory. Speaking from memory is more dynamic, provided you are sufficiently well-rehearsed not to forget anything. If you have to present in a language that is not your first language, consider writing a script and rehearse, rehearse and rehearse. Avoid showing the audience that you are reading from a script. Use big letters and space the lines of text so that it is easy to read when placed on the lectern or table in front of you. Politicians usually speak with a script, so why not you.

HANDLING STRESS

Oral presentations are becoming a popular assessment tool in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. It is usually a necessary skill in science and engineering endeavours. So if you are to make your way in the world, you will need this skill both at University and in business.

A few of us are terrified at the thought of public speaking, especially when we have never done so in the past. But who is to say you won't be good at it, particularly after a few goes. Nervousness is an essential ingredient for a good performance. The key though is to control that nervousness and control comes with good preparation: you know your subject, you know the order in which the subject should be conveyed, you are confident that the equipment you will use will not let you down, and you have physically rehearsed so often, that you can animate it in your sleep.

While travelling to the venue, go over your talk in your mind, without your cue cards, without your slides; there, you do know your talk.

So the only problem for you is seeing all those eyes looking at you. Well don't look at them, or rather don't catch anyone's gaze. Look at, and through, the audience. Stand behind the lectern or front desk. If none is provided then demand you have one – you are the speaker. That's why you should visit the auditorium before the event to see exactly what the set up will be like and you can request a change in good time.

You have a dry mouth? Drink some water, have some ready just in case your mouth becomes too dry to speak, but otherwise don't swig from a bottle all the time!

Don't be rushed to start. Start when you are comfortably composed. Breathe deeply, slowly and smoothly. If your hands are shaking, hold the lectern, use the table on which you have placed your lap-top. Start with something you know well: "Good morning, I'm Fred Bloggs, I'm from the Organic Research Foundation in Outer Mongolia and I'm going to talk to you about the latest developments in positronic algorithms". Have the first one or two sentences written out in big letters on the lectern. Know them by heart, but read them out having practised many many times. Then you're off, you know your talk by heart. Rehearsals will have indicated those sentences you muddle or cannot remember; and you will have written them down in big letters. This may happen for key sentences that link slides.

If you are obviously nervous, the audience will be with you, not against you. So feel positive about yourself, you will survive the ordeal.