

Guide to Presentation Skills

As part of your studies, you will be required to give a presentation as part of your assessment. Presentation skills are becoming an increasingly important skill for students to develop as part of academic study but also for future employability.

This guide will help you to:

- Identify the skills required to make a successful presentation
- Plan a successful strategy for effective research, preparation and delivery of the presentation
- Understand the importance of practicing the presentation
- Understand the importance of reflecting upon your performance in order to strengthen future presentations

The Presentation Process

There are four stages in the presentation process. These are as follows:

1. Research stage
2. Preparation stage
3. Delivery stage
4. Reflection stage

1. Research stage

Remember the 'five Ps': **P**roper **P**lanning **P**revents **P**oor **P**erformance.

This is the stage where information on the topic of the presentation is gathered. It is very important to guard against content overload. You should never try to fit too much information into the time available as high speed delivery is not enjoyable for the audience.

If the presentation is an assessed part of a programme you need, at stage one, to check the assessment criteria. One important point to check is whether there is equal emphasis between content and presentation style.

You also need to know your audience. Think carefully about what they will want from your presentation.

What considerations do you need to take into account with the following audiences?

- An interview presentation to a panel of solicitors
- A presentation on change in the law to the student union

For many presentations you will need to identify a range of books, articles and cases on the topic of the presentation. Get hold of these resources and begin work on them well before the date set for delivery of the presentation.

When you are researching the particular topic some ideas may enter your head about how the material could actually be used in the presentation. Make sure to make a note of these good ideas as otherwise you may forget them during completion of stage two.

2. Preparation stage

In planning the structure of the presentation you need to remember not only the oral delivery element but also the appropriate use of visual aids.

A good tip which will strengthen your focus during stage 2 is to frame a question that you will answer in the presentation. This assists your preparation because it identifies the 'job' that the presentation is supposed to do.

The presentation should 'tell a story' and accordingly it should be organised along the following lines:

- **Introduction**

This is the beginning of the presentation. It should outline the topic to be discussed and explain the structure of the presentation. It should also tell the audience why the topic is of contemporary importance or interest. One of the positive aspects of the introduction from the audience point of view is that it lets them know what is coming up.

- **Main Body**

This is the bulk of the presentation and it should be divided into a series of issues. One point should lead into another. Examples should be provided in appropriate places to illustrate points being made.

This core part of the presentation profits from having 'signposting' for example a phrase such as: *'there are four strong reasons why this change ought to be implemented and I shall explore each in turn'*.

- **Conclusion**

The conclusion to the presentation has to set out a brief summary of the material covered and provide a direct answer to the question tackled in the presentation.

Using visual aids

The presentation should engage not just the ears of members of the audience but also their eyes. Some visual aids should be used. The visual aids must not be crammed with content. Take care not to squash too much material into a handout or a PowerPoint slide.

A handout should never be a word-for-word copy of your presentation. You should always try to ensure that your visual aids will increase engagement with the audience rather than act as a distraction.

If you are going to use PowerPoint, a whiteboard or a flipchart you should pay a visit to the room in which the presentation is going to take place well before it starts. This gives you an opportunity to check for any potential problems or hazards. It also makes you think ahead of time about where in the room you are going to stand during delivery of the presentation.

Using a whiteboard can often be useful as a means of setting out for the audience the link-up between certain points.

It is essential that you practice the presentation five or six times. This makes you confident that all of its content fits together in a logical and coherent way. It also means that you become more and more familiar with both the content of your material and the pace you are going to need to adopt on the day.

3. Delivery stage

GET THERE WELL BEFORE THE START TIME

Never read from a prepared script. Remind yourself of the order in which the points need to be raised by using numbered cue cards. These cards should contain short reminders of each key point. Furthermore you should put on these cards any figures, quotations, names or other material which you wish to state exactly.

Speak at an appropriate pace, neither too slow nor with too much speed. Speak loudly and clearly. Concentrate on the delivery of each and every word so that none of them are slurred. Vary your pace and tone of delivery so that the presentation does not come across as dull. Variation in tone is also a positive means of achieving particular emphasis on certain points. Make sure to maintain a good deal of eye contact with the audience. Use your hands a bit to seem animated and enthusiastic about the task rather than appearing 'flat' or disinterested. Put energy and enthusiasm into what you are saying. Make a suitable pause if you wish to allow a really important point to sink in with the audience.

Make sure that 'signposting' is a feature of the presentation. Start each fresh point with an explanation of how it relates to the rest of your material.

When dealing with any questions which may come at the end of the presentation make sure not to talk for too long in giving your answer. If you go on for too long it may appear that you are 'rambling' and some content of the answer may look like 'waffle' to the audience.

Always remember that human beings are social creatures and crave contact with one another. The audience will enjoy listening to you.

4. Reflection stage

This stage is sometimes forgotten or dropped. It should not be! It involves carrying out a critical self-evaluation of your performance so that you can improve for the future. Any feedback documents that you receive from members of the audience should be kept safely. The feedback should not be ignored. Try to be honest with yourself about your strengths and the areas where you have room to improve.