



Presenting Your Content

Presenting primarily focuses on oral presentations, but much of the information below is also helpful for poster presentations, many of which require spoken communication in some form.

Goal: Send your audience home with new information that they can apply.

You Are Your Most Important Medium

You, as the presenter, are a medium. Use yourself wisely as a valuable commodity in the presentation process.

Remember the factors you control:

- You selected the topic.
- You developed the content for your topic.
- You decide how to present your topic.
- Your presentation guides your audience to reinforce their learning.

Profiling Your Audience

People learn best when they can attach new content to what they already know. With this in mind think about your audience's knowledge base relative to your topic. You may have no more than some best guesses of who will be in your audience, but going through a general assessment will force you to ask questions that will help you determine the information level at which you should start your presentation. Presenting in class? Ask classmates what they know about your topic. Going to a conference for the first time? Ask people who have been what they know about typical attendees. If you are attending an annual conference familiar to you, use your knowledge of conference attendees to help you determine the most relevant ways of providing them with useful information.

Demeanor and Oral Delivery

Your mannerisms and demeanor inevitably will influence how well your presentation is received. Think of the best and the worst of times you have been in an audience to learn. In the worst case situations, how often did your presenter:

Use distracting gestures?
Slump over the lectern or pace before the audience while looking at the floor?

Verbally stumble -- repeatedly?
Ramble at length about side issues?

In the best situations, how often did your presenter:

Use gestures with a purpose?

Stand comfortably erect and make eye contact with the audience?
Speak with a confident tone?

Logically lead you from one point to another?

Thinking through your experiences as an audience member can help you develop your personal posture as a presenter.

Minimize the distractions:

Organize your information:

- Identify the key points you want to convey and develop your content with your audience in mind (see Profiling Your Audience above).
- Write to your key points and weed out information that does not relate to those key points, even if the asides are fascinating to you.
- feedback to re-sequence, add, or delete content to clarify and establish logical sequence.
- Edit charts and graphs the same way you edit the words you will speak, and delete data that do not apply to your key points.

If you think your information is well organized but you are not adequately prepared to present it to someone else:

- Ask a pro. Find an authority on the topic (colleague, mentor, classmate, or friend) and ask for his or her guidance. This person may help you confine your presentation to a few key points, help you become familiar with them and gain confidence presenting them

If your enthusiasm is obvious but you are not sure that you can cover your material in the time allowed for your presentation:

- Practice your presentation by actually speaking it out loud and not simply thinking it through with your eye on the clock. You can think faster than you can speak.
- Timing how long you need to verbalize your content will let you know whether you need to delete portions of your material.
- Remember, you are sharing a few key points, not preparing a paper for publication.

If you are not sure you can deliver your message with ease:

- Talk through your material as though you were giving your real presentation. This will help you uncover word series that are tongue twisters when spoken even though they roll smoothly through your brain.
- Rephrase those sections of your material until you can speak them comfortably and pronounce each word distinctly.
- When you know you can do this, you will become more familiar with your planned sequencing of material and elevate your confidence level.

When you feel ready but before you present, rehearse your content:

Presenters who pace and make no visual connection with the audience will appear to lack confidence in their content, regardless of how knowledgeable they may be.

You as a presenter can help your audience learn by minimizing distractions and increasing their comfort level.

When you rehearse your presentation and receive feedback, you will receive valuable information about how you appear to your audience.

Invite your rehearsal audience to point out any distractions and to comment on your demeanor and delivery.

- Your practice audience may identify gestures that are part of your usual behavior but is not one that will convey a sense of confidence to your audience. For example standing erect with your head postured to convey confidence can instill confidence that you will communicate to your audience.
- Making eye contact can give you instant feedback. If you see puzzled expressions, you can ask for questions or adjust your pace to insure that your audience has time to process your material. If you see interested expressions, you can assume you are being heard and are speaking at a good pace.

- If you receive feedback that your enthusiasm for your topic does not come through in your presentation, perhaps you are speaking in an unnatural monotone. Record your presentation, and during playback, listen for enthusiasm and confidence in your voice. If it is lacking, try to be more conversational in your approach, and speak while practicing in a normal (not too loud) voice.
- Use your audiences as a barometer – first your practice audience, but also be prepared to alter your approach based on what eye contact tells you about the audience for which you have prepared your presentation.

When you practice your presentation and receive feedback, ask yourself whether feedback that applies to your words and gestures also applies to your graphics (too many; not relevant; unclear; easily understood; enhance your message). If practice indicates that you have taken the necessary steps to develop clear and concise content, you will begin your real presentation with the knowledge that you have logically sequenced information you can deliver at a comfortable pace within the allotted time.

The Pause: An Essential Tool

Let's say you have 15 minutes to deliver an oral presentation and five minutes to field questions. Are you already thinking about how many words you can speak per minute? If so, stop and shift gears now.

Do you sometimes lose track of a speaker's content because you are puzzling over something he or she said a moment before what is currently being spoken? A corporate guideline for presentations states that you should spend 90 percent of your time presenting and 10 percent of your time pausing so clients can absorb your material. In academia, where so much of your information will be new and possibly data laden, forget this rule and create your own guideline. Pause after introducing any material that you would need time to absorb and process if the material were new to you. Remember: *Providing time to process content is a valuable gift for your audience.*

Use Graphics

Graphics can visually help your audience understand elements of your presentation that might be misunderstood if you describe them with words alone. Graphics can be as concrete as an anatomical specimen or as abstract as a theoretical model. Supplement your graphic with verbal descriptions and pauses so your audience can process what they see and hear. Whether you are making an oral presentation or a poster, remember to present only enough content to achieve your objectives. Anything more will be mental and visual clutter. You can provide visual pauses within your graphic displays by leaving

space around text or graphics so the viewer can focus on a segment without distractions from an adjoining component. Too much visual content in a poster can cause a viewer to react the same way as when a presenter speaks too rapidly. Viewers and listeners need time to process new material.

Why charts and graphs, but not tables?

You have terrific data. You have placed it neatly in a table with all decimals aligned. Why might an instructional designer recommend that you use your table as a handout and display only essential data in a graph or chart for your oral or poster presentation?

Because charts and graphs partially process information more quickly for your viewer or listener. Often the key point you want to make relates to trends or relationships that can be seen quickly in a graph. Presenting numbers in a table may not be as effective for initially illustrating your point as comparisons of what parts of a whole those numbers represent as revealed in a pie chart. Tabular data usually takes time to absorb, and as a handout your audience can review your data later at their own pace.

Handout tips:

- At the end of your handout – or at the bottom of the first page – add your name, credentials and other information you would normally put on a business card. This will permit persons from your audience to contact you if they have questions after giving your data closer review.
- Provide on your handout all conference information needed to cite your data in case a person wishes to refer to your data in their work.