



ACCRA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

The University of the future

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Guide to Research Presentation Skills

Introduction

A Presentation is a fast and potentially effective method of getting things done and making the results known to others

What can a presentation do for you?

Firstly; it puts you on display. Your Research supervisors and colleagues will need to see evidence of your research output and your work in progress to be able to give you their views and contributions to guide your work

Secondly; it allows you to ask questions and to initiate discussion. Presenting your work gives you the opportunity to present and raise the issues, that could provide your audience an opportunity to provide you with valuable inputs and contributions that could further your research work.

Finally; presentations can be fun. They are your chance to speak your mind, tell the people what the world is really like. While you hold the stage, the audience is bound by good manners to sit still and watch the performance.

The Objectives of Communication

The single most important observation is that the objective of communication is not the transmission but the reception. The whole preparation, presentation and content of a presentation must therefore be geared not to the speaker but to the audience. The presentation of a perfect research proposal is a failure if the audience do not understand or are not persuaded of its merits. The objective of communication is to make your message understood and remembered.

The main problem with this objective is, of course, the people to whom you are talking. The average human being has a very short attention span and a million other things to think about. Your job in the presentation is to reach through this mental fog and to hold the attention long enough to make your point.

The Plan

It is difficult to over -estimate the importance of careful preparation. Five minutes on the floor in front of senior research colleagues and your peers could decide the acceptance of your research work. With so much potentially at stake, the presenter must concentrate not

only upon the facts being presented but upon the style, pace, tone and ultimately tactics which should be used. As a rule of thumb for an average presentation, no less than 1 hour should be spent in preparation for 5 minutes of talking.

Suppose you have a presentation to make, where do you start?

- ***Formulate your Objectives***

The starting point in planning any presentation is to formulate a precise objective. This should take the form of a simple, concise statement of intent. For example, the purpose of your presentation may be to present the details of your research proposal or work-in-progress in relation to a specific chapter of your thesis. No two objectives will be served equally well by the same presentation; and if you are not sure at the onset what you are trying to do, it is unlikely that your plan will achieve it.

One question is: how many different objectives can you achieve, in say, 30 minutes - and the answer: not many. In the end it is far more productive to achieve one goal than to blunder over several. The best approach is to isolate the essential objective and to list at most two others which can be addressed providing they do not distract from the main one. *Focus is key*. If you do not focus upon your objective, it is unlikely that the audience will.

- ***Identify the Audience***

The next task is to consider the audience to determine how best to achieve your objectives in the context of these people. Essentially this is done by identifying their aims and objectives while attending your presentation. If you can somehow convince them they are achieving those aims while at the same time achieving your own, you will find a helpful and receptive audience.

This principle of matching the audience aims, however, goes beyond the simple salesmanship of an idea - it is the simplest and most effective manner of obtaining their attention at the beginning. If your opening remarks imply that you understand the problem and that you have a solution, then they will be flattered at your attention and attentive to your every word.

Structure

All presentations should have a definite structure or format; a talk without a structure is a woolly mess. If you do not order your thoughts into a structured manner, the audience will not be able to follow them. Having established the aim of your presentation you should choose the most appropriate structure to achieve it.

However, the structure must not get in the way of the main message. If it is too complex, too convoluted or simply too noticeable the audience will be distracted. If a section is unnecessary to the achievement of your fundamental objectives, pluck it out.

- *Sequential Argument*

One of the simplest structures is that of sequential argument which consists of a series of linked statements ultimately leading to a conclusion. However, this simplicity can only be achieved by careful and deliberate delineation between each section. One technique is the use of frequent reminders to the audience of the main point which have proceeded and explicit explanation of how the next topic will lead on from this.

- *Hierarchical Decomposition*

In hierarchical decomposition the main topic is broken down into sub-topics and each sub-topics into smaller topics until eventually everything is broken down into very small basic units. In written communication this is a very powerful technique because it allows the reader to re-order the presentation at will, and to return to omitted topics at a later date.

In verbal communication the audience is restricted to the order of the presenter and the hierarchy should be kept simple reinforced. As with sequential argument it is useful to summarise each section at its conclusion and to introduce each major new section with a statement of how it lies in the hierarchical order.

- *Question Orientated*

With presentations that lend themselves to question orientated format, the approach is to introduce a specific problem and its relevant background, and then to outline the various solutions to that problem listing the advantages and disadvantages of each solution in turn. Finally, all possible options are summarized in terms of their pro's and con's, and either the preferred solution is presented for endorsement by the audience or a

discussion is initiated leading to the decision. One trick for obtaining the desired outcome is to establish during the presentation the criteria by which the various options are to be judged; this alone should allow you to obtain your desired outcome.

- ***Pyramid***

In a newspaper, the story is introduced in its entirety in a catchy first paragraph. The next few paragraphs repeat the same information only giving further details to each point. The next section repeats the entire story again, but developing certain themes within each of the sub-points and again adding more information. This is repeated until the reporter runs out of story. The editor then simply decides upon the newsworthiness of the report and cuts from the bottom to the appropriate number of column inches.

There are two main advantages of using this style for presentations. Firstly, it can increase the audiences receptiveness to the main ideas. Since at every stage of the pyramid they have already become familiar with the ideas and indeed know what to expect next.

This sense of *deja vu* can falsely give the impression that what they are hearing are their own ideas. The second advantage is that the duration of the presentation can be easily altered by cutting the talk in exactly the same way as the newspaper editor might have done to the news story. This degree of flexibility may be useful if the same presentation is to be used several times in different situations.

- ***The Meaty Sandwich***

The simplest and most direct format remains the meaty sandwich. This is the simple beginning-middle-end format in which the main meat of the exposition is contained in the middle and is preceded by an introduction and followed by a summary and conclusion. This is really the appropriate format for all small sub-sections in all the previous structures. If the presentation is short enough, or the topic simple enough, it can indeed form the entirety of the presentation.

The Beginning

It is imperative to plan your beginning carefully; there are five main elements:

- *Get their attention*

Too often in a presentation, the first few minutes are lost while people adjust in their seats, drift in with coffee and finish the conversation they were having with the person next to them. You only have a limited time and every minute is precious to you so, from the beginning, make sure they pay attention.

- *Establish a theme*

Basically, you need to start the audience thinking about the subject matter of your presentation. This can be done by a statement of your main objective, unless for some reason you wish to keep it hidden. They will each have some experience or opinions on this and at the beginning you must make them bring that experience into their own minds.

- *Present a structure*

If you explain briefly at the beginning of a talk how it is to proceed, then the audience will know what to expect. This can help to establish the theme and also provide something concrete to hold their attention. Ultimately, it provides a sense of security in the promise that this speech too will end.

- *Create a rapport*

If you can win the audience over in the first minute, you will keep them for the remainder. You should plan exactly how you wish to appear to them and use the beginning to establish that relationship. You may be presenting yourself as their friend, as an expert, perhaps even as a judge, but whatever role you choose you must establish it at the very beginning.

The Ending

The final impression you make on the audience is the one they will remember. Thus it is worth planning your last few sentences with extreme care.

As with the beginning, it is necessary first to get their attention, which will have wandered. This requires a change of pace, a new visual aid or perhaps the introduction of one final culminating idea. In some formats the ending will be a summary of the main points of the talk.

One of the greatest mistakes is to tell the audience that this is going to be a summary because at that moment they simply switch off. Indeed it is best that the ending comes unexpectedly with that final vital phrase left hanging in the air and ringing round their memories. Alternatively the ending can be a flourish, with the pace and voice leading the audience through the final crescendo to the inevitable conclusion.

Visual Aids

Most people expect visual reinforcement for any verbal message being delivered. While it would be unfair to blame television entirely for this, it is useful to understand what the audience is accustomed to, for two reasons: firstly, you can meet their expectations using the overhead projector, a slide show, or even a video presentation; secondly, if you depart from the framework of a square picture flashed before their eyes, and use a different format, then that novelty will be most arresting. For instance, if you are describing the four functions of a project manager then display the four "hats" he/she must wear; if you are introducing the techniques of brainstorming then brandish a fishing rod to "fish for" ideas.

With traditional visual aids however, there are a few rules which should be followed to ensure they are used effectively. Most are common sense, and most are commonly ignored. As with all elements of a presentation each different viewfoil/slide should have a distinct purpose - and if it has no purpose it should be removed.

With that purpose firmly in mind you should design the viewfoil/slide for that purpose. Some viewfoils/slides are there to reinforce the verbal message and so to assist in recall; others are used to explain information which can be more easily displayed than discussed: and some viewfoils are designed simply for entertainment and thus to pace the presentation.

If your viewfoil/slide is scruffy then your audience will notice that, and not what is written upon it. Do not clutter a viewfoil/slide or it will confuse rather than assist. Do not simply photocopy information if there is more data on the page than you wish to present; in these cases, the data should be extracted before being displayed. Make sure that your writing can be read from the back of the room. Talk to the audience, not the visual aid.

The Delivery

"The human body is truly fascinating - there are some I could watch all day" - Anon

Whatever you say and whatever you show; it is you, yourself which will remain the focus of the audience's attention. If you but strut and fret your hour upon the stage and then are gone, no-one will remember what you said. The presenter has the power both to kill the message and to enhance it a hundred times beyond its worth. Your job as a manager is to use the potential of the presentation to ensure that the audience is motivated and inspired rather than disconcerted or distracted. There are five key facets of the human body which deserve attention in presentation skills: the eyes, the voice, the expression, the appearance, and how you stand.

- ***The Eyes***

The eyes are said to be the key to the soul and are therefore the first and most effective weapon in convincing the audience of your honesty, openness and confidence in the objectives of your presentation. This impression may of course be totally false, but here is how to convey it.

Even when in casual conversation, your feelings of friendship and intimacy can be evaluated by the intensity and duration of eye contact. During the presentation you should use this to enhance your rapport with the audience by establishing eye contact with each and every member of the audience as often as possible.

For small groups this is clearly possible but it can also be achieved in large auditoriums since the further the audience is away from the presenter the harder it is to tell precisely where he or she is looking.

Thus by simply staring at a group of people at the back of a lecture theatre it is possible to convince each of them individually that he or she is the object of your attention. During presentations, try to hold your gaze fixed in specific directions for five or six

seconds at a time. Shortly after each change in position, a slight smile will convince each person in that direction that you have seen and acknowledged them.

- *The Voice*

After the eyes comes the voice, and the two most important aspects of the voice for the public speaker are projection and variation. It is important to realise from the onset that few people can take their ordinary conversation voice and put it on stage. If you can, then perhaps you should move to Hollywood. The main difference comes in the degree of feedback which you can expect from the person to whom you are talking. In ordinary conversation you can see from the expression, perhaps a subtle movement of the eye, when a word or phrase has been missed or misunderstood. In front of an audience you have to make sure that this never happens.

The simple advice is to slow down and to take your time. Remember the audience is constrained by good manners not to interrupt you so there is no need to maintain a constant flow of sound. A safe style is to be slightly louder and slightly slower than a fire-side chat with slightly deaf aunt. As you get used to the sound, you can adjust it by watching the audience.

A monotone speech is both boring and soporific, so it is important to try to vary the pitch and speed of your presentation. At the very least, each new sub-section should be preceded by a pause and a change in tone to emphasise the delineation. If tonal variation does not come to you naturally try making use of rhetorical questions throughout your speech

- *Expression*

The audience watch your face. If you are looking listless or distracted then they will be listless and distracted; if you are smiling, they will be wondering why and listen to find out. In normal conversation your meaning is enhanced by facial reinforcement. Thus in a speech you must compensate both for stage nerves and for the distance between yourself and the audience. The message is quite simply: make sure that your facial expressions are natural, only more so.

- *Appearance*

There are many guides to presentation styles which lay heavy emphasis upon the way you dress and in the last analysis this is a matter of personal choice. That choice should

however be deliberately made. When you are giving a presentation you must dress for the audience, not for yourself; if they think you look out of place, then you are.

- ***Stance***

When an actor initially learns a new character part, he or she will instinctively adopt a distinct posture or stance to convey that character. It follows therefore that while you are on stage, your stance and posture will convey a great deal about you. The least you must do is make sure your stance does not convey boredom; at best, you can use your whole body as a dynamic tool to reinforce your rapport with the audience.

The perennial problem is what to do with your hands. These must not wave aimlessly through the air, or fiddle constantly with a pen, or (worst of all visually) juggle change in your trouser pockets. The key is to keep your hands still, except when used in unison with your speech. To train them initially, find a safe resting place which is comfortable for you, and aim to return them there when any gesture is completed.

The Techniques of Speech

Every speaker has a set of "tricks of the trade" which he or she holds dear - the following are a short selection of such advice taken from various sources.

- ***Make an impression***

The average audience is very busy: they have husbands and wives, schedules and slippages, cars and mortgages; and although they will be trying very hard to concentrate on your speech, their minds will inevitably stray. Your job is to do something, anything, which captures their attention and makes a lasting impression upon them. Once you have planned your speech and honed it down to its few salient points, isolate the most important and devise some method to make it stick.

- ***Repeat, Repeat***

The average audience is very busy: they have husbands or wives etc, etc - but repetition makes them hear. The average audience is easily distracted, and their attention will slip during the most important message of your speech - so repeat it. You don't necessarily have to use the resonant tonal sounds of the repeated phrase, but simply make the point again and again and again with different explanations and in different ways. The classic

advice of the Sergeant Major is: "First you tell 'em what you are going to tell 'em, then you tell 'em, then you tell 'em what you told 'em!"

- *Draw a Sign*

Research into teaching has yielded the following observation: "We found that students who failed to get the point did so because they were not looking for it". If the audience knows when to listen, they will. So tell them: *the important point is ...* .

- *Draw a Picture*

The human brain is used to dealing with images, and this ability can be used to make the message more memorable. This means using metaphors or analogies to express your message. Thus a phrase like "we need to increase the market penetration before there will be sufficient profits for a pay related bonus" becomes "we need a bigger slice of the cake before the feast".

- *Jokes*

The set piece joke can work very well, but it can also lead to disaster. You must choose a joke which is apt, and one which will not offend any member of the audience. This advice tends to rule out all racist, sexist or generally rude jokes. If this seems to rule out all the jokes you can think of, then you should avoid jokes in a speech.

Amusing asides are also useful in maintaining the attention of the audience, and for relieving the tension of the speech. If this comes naturally to you, then it is a useful tool for pacing your delivery to allow periods of relaxation in between your sign-posted major points.

- *Plain Speech*

Yes!

- *The Narrative*

Everyone loves a story and stories can both instruct and convey a message: Zen Philosophy is recorded in its stories, and Christianity was originally taught in parables. If you can weave your message into a story or a personal anecdote, then you can have them wanting to hear your every word - even if you have to make it up.

- **Rehearsal**

There is no substitute for rehearsal. You can do it in front of a mirror, or to an empty theatre. In both cases, you should accentuate your gestures and vocal projection so that you get used to the sound and sight of yourself. Do not be put off by the mirror - remember: you see a lot less of yourself than your friends do.

- **Relaxation**

If you get nervous just before the show, either concentrate on controlling your breathing or welcome the extra adrenaline. The good news is that the audience will never notice your nerves nearly as much as you think. Similarly, if you dry-up in the middle - *smile*, look at your notes, and take your time. The silence will seem long to you, but less so to the audience.

Conclusion

Once the presentation is over and you have calmed down, you should try to honestly evaluate your performance. Either alone, or with the help of a friend in the audience, decide what was the least successful aspect of your presentation and resolve to concentrate on that point in the next talk you give. If it is a problem associated with the preparation, then deal with it there; if it is a problem with your delivery, write yourself a reminder note and put it in front of you at the next talk.

Practice is only productive when you make a positive effort to improve - try it.

Acknowledgment: *The details of this Guideline is an adaption of an original piece written by Gerard M Blair a Senior Lecturer in VLSI Design at the Department of Electrical Engineering, The University of Edinburgh.*