

Skills review

1 Preparing your presentation

Planning your presentation

Identifying your key messages

Whatever the context, presenting is about communicating ideas or messages to an audience in order to achieve something. When you prepare a presentation, begin by identifying your key messages. Ask yourself 'What do I want to say?'. Try not to have too many aims. Three messages are fine but avoid having more than four or five. You may make some mistakes with your language but if your message is clear, then an audience will listen to you.

Identifying the needs of your audience

Next, think about your audience. Who are they? What are they concerned about? What do they need to know? The more you know about your audience, the better your presentation will be.

Preparing yourself and practising

Rehearsing

There is a big difference between reading through your notes and actually standing up and practising. When you rehearse, try moving around the room as if the audience is there with you. As well as rehearsing what you are going to say, it is important to practise your tone, delivery and body language.

Checking the room, the equipment and the seating arrangements

Try to get into the room early and plan where everyone will sit. Where possible, change the layout to suit your style of presentation. Check the technical equipment and your slides.

Dealing with nerves

Controlling your nerves

Good presenters get nervous. Nerves can be positive because they give your presentation energy and make you concentrate. People deal with nerves in different ways. Physical exercise, listening to music or practising deep breathing can all help you to feel more relaxed.

Believe that you have something important to tell your audience

The best way to reduce nerves is to believe in what you are presenting. Good presenters are confident because they want their audience to listen to their message. Always remember before you start: the presentation isn't about you, it's about your audience.

2 Structuring your presentation

Follow the Core Structure

The key points to remember when structuring your presentation are:

- keep it simple. The audience needs to understand each stage of a presentation or they will stop listening.
- repeat your main messages so that the audience remembers them when they leave.
- guide the audience during the presentation as if you are taking them on a journey.

Following the Core Structure is an effective way to do all three of these things.

The Core Structure



In the introduction you tell the audience what you are going to present and provide a summary of your main message(s). Then, in the body of the presentation, you present the details of your key messages while making sure that you only deal with one message in each section of the body. Then, at the end, you tell the audience what you have presented and sum up the main messages. This can be summarized as:

- tell the audience what you're going to tell them
- tell them
- then tell them what you've told them.

Why is it important to repeat your key messages three times in this way? Audiences will probably only remember about twenty per cent of what you say. Using the Core Structure helps ensure that they remember the twenty per cent that you want them to.

Moving from one part of the presentation to the next

The presenter needs to guide the audience and make sure they know when one section finishes and another one begins. The simplest way to guide the audience is to actually say that one section has finished and a new one has begun. For example: *So I've finished explaining the benefits of Product X. Now I'd like to explore how it could be introduced into your company.*

You can further emphasize the transition to a new point by making physical changes such as moving from one side of the screen to another or by pausing and changing the energy of your voice. Announcing the beginnings and ends of sections makes the presentation easier to follow and as a result the audience will start to trust the presenter. Also, if someone in the audience has lost their concentration in the previous section, this allows them to re-enter the presentation.

3 Introducing your presentation

The ABCD model

The ABCD model is a simple way to make sure you answer an audience's initial questions and concerns. It is a list of elements to include in your introduction. You do not have to structure your introduction in this order but make sure it covers all four elements.

Attention

You need to get the audience's attention. Even before you speak you can get their attention. Stand confidently, pause and make eye contact before beginning. Non-verbal communication is just as important as verbal communication. If you can, talk to some of the audience members who have arrived early and smile or greet other people coming in. Show the audience that you are pleased to see them.

Once you start talking, there are a number of ways to get the audience's attention such as: interacting with them (e.g. by asking them a question), mentioning news stories which have a connection with your presentation, showing a strong visual image, etc.

Benefits

This is the *most* important part of the introduction. The audience needs to know what they will gain from your presentation. Show that you understand your audience's values and concerns and explain that your presentation will help them deal with these. When you explain the benefits clearly, everyone will want to listen.

Credibility

Why should your audience listen to you? How do they know that you are an expert? You have to establish your credibility. There are two main ways you can do this. Firstly, you can tell them your credentials directly (e.g. *'I am the director of Save IT and have been advising companies such as yours for over ten years...'*) or you can tell them indirectly by mentioning something you did in the past (e.g. *'When I advised my very first client ten years ago...'*).

There is also a third way to establish credibility without saying anything: enthusiasm. By showing that you genuinely want to communicate with your audience you can often demonstrate credibility directly.

Direction

The audience wants to know what is going to happen during the presentation. What is it about? How long will it last? When can they ask questions? Are there any handouts or videos? Giving direction involves telling them what you will talk about and also answering their practical questions about timing, structure and delivery. Including these details also shows that you are in control of the presentation and so the audience will trust you more.

4 Delivering your message

The PEEP principle

Using the PEEP principle

The main objective for any presentation is to deliver one or more key messages. The PEEP principle is a simple tool for structuring each section of your presentation that helps you to achieve this aim. It works as follows:



So you begin with a direct communication of the key message. You then provide more detail by giving explanations and examples. Finally, you recap the key point again.

Why is PEEP useful?

By providing a clear structure for each section, the PEEP principle helps you to remain disciplined in communicating your key messages. If you like to be spontaneous or if your presentation is very interactive, it is easy for your messages you become lost. The PEEP principle helps you to keep control of the presentation. If the presentation moves away from the key point, you can bring it back to the main message again by saying *'That was an interesting discussion – now I'd just like to go back to the point I was making earlier.'* Audiences like to be told what to notice as it makes the presentation easier to follow, so make sure that you tell them directly what is important. Use phrases such as *'The key thing we need to remember here is ...'*

Building on PEEP

Once you become confident with the basic PEEP principle, you can try variations. Here are two variations which still maintain the structure of PEEP but take slightly different approaches.

1 Dream

Use the 'dream' structure when you want to introduce a change; for example, asking an audience to change to a new product or introducing a change to a department. You begin by describing what the future could look like (that is the dream) and then you remind them of what the situation is now (the reality). Finally, describe what your audience will need to do in order to move from the 'reality' to the 'dream'. This is a powerful approach because it stimulates the audience's imagination in a positive way.

2 Disaster

Use the 'disaster' structure to persuade the audience to accept a change that they do not like or agree with. Begin by describing the change that is required; this is your key point. Next describe the objections that your audience may have to this change. Then go on to explain the negative consequences for your audience if they maintain these objections and don't make the change that you are arguing for; this is the disaster. End by repeating the need for change – your key point.

5 Using visual aids

Common mistakes

Presenters use visual aids to reinforce their messages and clarify examples. One of the most important points to remember is that you are in charge of the visual aids – they are not in charge of you! Some common mistakes are:

- too many slides
- too much text on the slides
- the presenter simply reading the slides aloud
- the presenter looking at the screen throughout the presentation

Designing your slides and the Rule of Five

Slides need to communicate instantly. If the audience has to work hard to read the slide, this means that they are not listening to you. Slides should support what you are saying; they do not need to contain all the detail. As a general rule, use no more than five lines on a slide and no more than five words per line. This is the 'Rule of Five' and indicates a *maximum* number: one line or even one word may be more effective in some cases. Also remember to only present one message on each slide.

Often a picture can communicate more effectively than words. If you present complicated information involving facts or figures, then you can use a graph or a diagram. Try to make them simple as possible and only include the information that really matters.

Working with visual aids

Often presenters get the audience to focus on the slides. Slides make presenters feel safe but they can also lose an audience's interest. Here are some practical tips to remember.

- **Eye contact:** Make a conscious effort to maintain eye contact with your audience for at least 90% of the time.
- **Point things out on screen:** Avoid using the laser pointer. When possible, point things out physically instead. Physically pointing things out on screen helps to keep the audience interested (look at weather forecasters on TV). It creates energy and variety in the presentation. When you do this, remember to maintain eye contact and do not turn your back on the audience. If possible, use a remote 'clicker' so that you have the freedom to move around the space and do not have to keep returning to the keyboard.
- **Speak before clicking:** To appear professional and dynamic, announce the next slide before clicking. This way you will be seen to be in control of the slides. If you click first before speaking, it looks as if the slides are in charge, not you.

6 Concluding your presentation

How to create a confident conclusion

There are five steps to a confident conclusion.

- Announce the conclusion
- Recap the key messages
- Call for action
- Come full circle
- Thank the audience and ask for questions

Announce the conclusion

At the beginning of a presentation, the audience is curious but then as the presentation continues the audience's attention level gradually falls. If the presentation lasts more than 20 minutes, then attention falls more rapidly. However, if the audience knows the end is coming, their attention will suddenly jump. So if you use phrases like *'In conclusion...'* or *'Before I take questions and finish the presentation, I'd like to...'* then interest rises again.

Recap the key messages

Now you have increased interest again at the end, it's the last chance to repeat your main message(s). Summarize them quickly and emphasize the single most important point you would like them to take away from the presentation.

Call for action

As you explain what you want them to take away from your presentation, it is a good moment to ask your audience to do something as a result of your talk. Tell them what they should do directly. This may even be a small action such as looking into a subject further or discussing the issue with colleagues. This will make your conclusion feel confident and positive.

Come full circle

Sometimes it can be useful to refer back to the beginning of the presentation in order to provide a sense of completion to the presentation. This can provide a powerful sense of the journey that the audience has travelled.

Thank you for coming. Are there any questions?

Thanking your audience is a polite and simple way to show your appreciation for their attention but it also helps the rapport between you and your audience. If you want to be asked questions at the end, make sure you ask for them confidently. If you are hesitant when you ask for *'Any questions?'*, it might suggest you don't really want any questions and this leaves a poor impression.

7 Handling questions

The LEVER model for answering questions

The LEVER model can be used to answer any type of question effectively.



Listen

When someone asks a question, say nothing. Let them ask their question without any interruption. Use body language to show you are listening and interested. Make good eye contact and avoid any negative signals such as covering your mouth or folding your arms.

Acknowledging the question: Echo, Value and Empathize

There are three ways in which you can acknowledge a question although you only use one or two of these techniques at a time. Firstly, you could echo what you've been asked. By repeating back the question (perhaps using slightly different words), you can check you have understood the question correctly. This also helps with large audiences where people at the back might not be able to hear the questioner.

A second type of acknowledgement is to show that you value the question with a simple phrase like *'That's a good question'* or *'I'm please you asked me that'*. This is a useful technique if the questioner seems nervous. It is also a good way to handle an aggressive question as it stops you from seeming defensive or argumentative. The best way to handle an aggressive question is to act as if it is not aggressive at all.

A third technique is to empathize. If the questioner is worried or concerned, you can make them feel more comfortable by acknowledging these feelings. For example, you might say *'I can understand why you might be worried about that'*.

Respond

Finally, it is time to respond. Try to keep the response as short and clear as possible. If the response needs a long or complex explanation, check everyone understood your answer with a phrase such as *'Does that answer your question?'* If the reply starts to become too long, offer to meet the person afterwards to answer them personally. This ensures that other people have time to ask questions. If the questioner asks several questions at once, try to deal with each of them in turn.

Finally, people often worry that they will not be able to answer a difficult question. The rule here is: be honest. You may get into difficulty if you pretend to know something when you don't. If you can't answer, let them know. Where appropriate, you might offer to look into the matter and to reply to them at a later date.

8 Bringing it alive!

As you become more confident with the basic approaches to presenting, you will want to experiment and try new variations and techniques. There are three ways you can improve a presentation and make it come alive.

Involving your audience with interaction

Many presenters mistakenly think that a presentation is a one-way communication: the presenter talks and the audience listens. This is wrong! Audiences become more interested when you actively involve them in your presentation. Here are some simple ways to create genuine interaction with your audience.

- **Show of hands:** This is a simple technique which reminds the audience of the relevance of the presentation. For example, ask who has experienced a certain situation or how many people are concerned about a certain issue.
- **Discussion in pairs and groups:** Be silent for a few minutes and ask your audience to discuss and reflect on the issues in your talk.
- **Ask for contributions directly:** If you know your audience well, ask them questions directly.

Stimulating the audience's imagination

It might not always be appropriate to involve your audience directly, perhaps because it is a large audience or they come from a culture which does not expect that kind of approach. However, there are many ways in which we can present information so that it stimulates the audience's imagination.

- **Stories and anecdotes:** A story does not need to be long and complicated. Often it can be just a couple of sentences, for example a story about what you were doing last week when you discovered something.
- **Real-life examples:** Giving a good example works in a similar way to a story and can often get your message across more easily than a complex explanation.
- **Analogies:** Analogies create images in the minds of the audience. They are especially good for making sense of figures, quantities and measurements.
- **Rhetorical questions:** These are questions which do not require an actual response from the audience. Just by asking the question, people's minds automatically engage with the issue.
- **Repetition:** The occasional use of repetition, especially in threes, can create a spoken rhythm which is exciting and satisfying to hear.
- **Visualize the future or reflect on the past:** By describing a vision of the future, our audience starts to be inspired by possibilities (see also the 'Dream & Disaster' approach in Unit 4). If we ask our audience to remember the past, we can put them in touch with how it feels now compared to then.

Showing your attitude

The most interesting presenters make the audience feel that they really want to communicate with them. Consider the following:

- **Body language and eye contact:** Presenters mainly show their attitude through their body language and voice. Audiences like presenters with energy who move around. Maintaining eye contact with the audience is also very important.
- **Show belief and conviction:** Many audiences will be more convinced when they see that you believe in something personally or have real conviction. So sometimes you can give a sincere personal opinion instead of being too factual.
- **Big language:** Look for appropriate opportunities to use extreme language. Words like 'excellent' or 'dreadful' will interest the audience more than words like 'good' or 'bad'.