Presentation Skills

Giving Presentations

The most important thing with live presentations is to communicate clearly and make yourself understood.

If you experience stage fright, do your best to prepare well. Good, solid preparation will go a long way to help you cope with your nerves. These tips can help make your presentation go smoothly.

Checking what is Required

Read through the assignment task carefully. Check all of the instructions and make sure you know

- the topic and exactly what you are trying to present

- how long your presentation should last

- who your expected audience will be (i.e. who you are trying to convince and whether they will be hard to convince).

Designing PowerPoint slides

Using colour

- Be consistent. Ensure that all of your slides have the same or similar background images and colour schemes. PowerPoint's design templates can be used for this.

- Prepare slides that use a bold colour contrast, e.g. black or deep blue text on a cream background (black and white can be too glaring for the audience).

- Avoid using red or green for text or highlighting as it can be difficult to read.

Designing PowerPoint slides (cont.)

Using text

- Avoid using too much text. A useful guideline is the six-by-six rule (slides should have no more than six bullet points and each bullet point should be no more than six words long).

- Create bullet points which are clear summaries of key points. It is not necessary for bullet points to be complete sentences.

- Don't mix up your fonts and font sizes. Too many variations in font size and type can be visually confusing. Set clear hierarchies for type size to help your audience distinguish between headings, main text and other types of text.

Designing PowerPoint slides (cont.)

Using graphics

Many people find it easier to understand and remember concepts if images are used in addition to text. PowerPoint allows you to easily include graphics in your presentations, but think about the issues listed below.

- Try not to use Clip Art (files of images that come free with software packages) that you have seen in lots of other people's presentations: familiar images have less impact on an audience.

- Choose an appropriate quality for scanned images and beware of images that you take from the internet. They are generally of a very low quality and are likely to pixelate (lose their smoothness) when you project them onto a large screen.

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Designing PowerPoint slides (cont.)

Using graphics (cont.)

- Make sure graphics are relevant to your text and not just decorative.

- Consider using graphics to replace text where you think an image would be easier to understand.

- Ensure that the images that you use are simple and clear enough to be easily read at a distance. A small, overly complex and poor quality image will only frustrate your audience.

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Structuring a presentation

Presentations need to be very straightforward and logical. It is important that you avoid complex structures and focus on the need to explain and discuss your work clearly. An ideal structure for a presentation includes:

- a welcoming and informative introduction;

- a coherent series of main points presented in a logical sequence;

- a lucid and purposeful conclusion.

The introduction

This is the point at which the presenter explains the content and purpose of the presentation. This is a vitally important part of your talk as you will need to gain the audience's interest and confidence. Key elements of an effective introduction include:

- a positive start: "Good afternoon, my name is Anon and …";
- a statement of what will be discussed: "I am going to explore …";
- a statement of the treatment to be applied to the topic (e.g. to compare, contrast, evaluate, describe): "I will be comparing the four main principles of …";
- a statement of the outcomes of the presentation: "I hope this will provide us with …"

Main points

The main points are the backbone of your talk. They play an important role in helping you prioritise, focus and sequence your information.

When planning your presentation you should put aside your research notes and produce a list or summary of the main points that you would like to make, expressing each in a few words or a short sentence. Remember, a presentation is not an assessment of your written work, but of your ability to verbally convey your ideas and deliver content to your audience (hence the six-by-six rule discussed earlier).

Main points (cont.)

After you have identified your main points, you should embellish them with supporting information.

For example, add clarity to your argument through the use of diagrams, illustrate a link between theory and practice, or substantiate your claims with appropriate data.

Use the supporting information to add colour and interest to your talk, but avoid detracting from the clarity of your main points by overburdening them with too much detail (think about your time limits!).

Transitions

These are the signposts that help the audience navigate their way through your presentation. They can help divide information up into sub-sections, link different aspects of your talk and show progression through your topic. Importantly, transitions draw the audience's attention to the process of the presentation as well as its content. Examples include:

- "I will begin by discussing …";
- "Now that we have explored the … I would like to move on to …";
- "In contrast to my earlier statements concerning …";
- "Moving away from a focus on …."

The Conclusion

This is the stage at which you can summarise the content and purpose of your talk, offer an overview of what has been achieved and make a lasting impact. Important elements include:

- a review of the topic and purpose of your presentation: "In this presentation I wanted to explore …";

- a statement of the conclusions or recommendations to be drawn from your work: "I hope to have been able to show that the effect of ….";

- an indication of the next stages (what might be done to take this work further?): "This does of course highlight the need for further research in the area of …";

- (if applicable) an instruction as to what happens next (questions, discussion or group work?): "I would now like to give you the opportunity to ask questions …"

Summary

A presentation needs a carefully defined structure to make the most impact. This should centre on a series of identifiable main points that are supported by appropriate detail.

Use transitions to link and move between points, helping your audience to understand the development or your argument.

An introduction and conclusion are essential elements of your presentation. They enable you to establish a clear purpose for your talk at the start and summarise your main points before you finish speaking.