

## **Presentation advice**

The objectives of this note are to give you some guidelines for preparing and delivering verbal presentations.

This note has advice relating to:

- Content – the material you choose to present and how you structure your presentation
- Delivery – actually standing there and delivering the presentation verbally

## **Content advice**

Before you can give your presentation you have to decide the material you are going to put into your presentation (and the material you are going to leave out). You also have to decide the order in which you are going to present (deliver) the material. Together the material and the order in which it is placed (along with any visual aids) make up the content of the presentation.

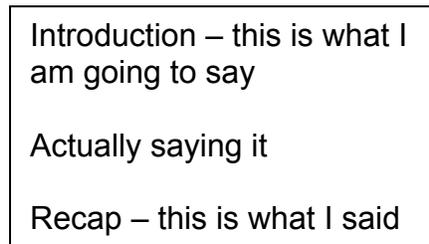
You might think that deciding the content of your presentation is similar to the process that you have followed in the past in writing essays/reports. In essence this is true, but there are important differences, and it is these that we want to highlight here. We can classify the difference between someone reading something and someone listening to a presentation under a number of headings:

- Speed - the reader can go at their own speed and can break off for a rest, coffee, etc if they want to. The listener must go at the speed of the presenter (although they can take a mental rest).
- Language - the language of essays/reports is not the language of everyday speech, e.g. in a report we might say "I believe that the reasoning behind this argument is incorrect" whereas in everyday life we might say "that argument is rubbish".
- Flexibility - the reader can go back to review something they have already read, skip over sections that are of no interest, etc. The listener (unless they have taken notes or have been given a handout) has no such flexibility and can lose track of what is being said.

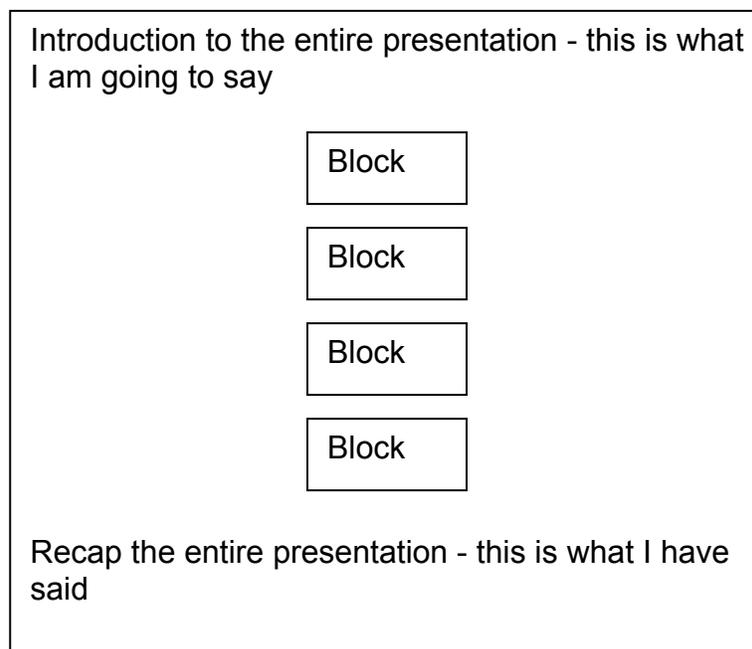
In order to account for these factors in deciding the content of your presentation there are a number of points that you should bear in mind:

- Interest - you should aim to capture and hold the attention of your listener. This is best done by making your presentation interesting. If you can do this then the listener will be more prepared to go at your speed and will make greater efforts to understand what you say.

- Language - try and avoid using the phrases that you would put into an essay/report and use natural everyday language.
- Recap - in order to give your listener a chance to understand what you are trying to say recap your essential message. To enable you to do this it is useful to structure the main body of your talk into discrete blocks as illustrated below. Each block consists of:



and the entire presentation (where we have 4 blocks below for illustration) is structured as:



Clearly it is important to link the various blocks together in a coherent fashion. Note also that a block structure of the type shown above gives you (the presenter) the flexibility to cope with unforeseen circumstances (e.g. a shortage of time due to a late start) by omitting complete blocks if necessary (provided this is possible).

## Delivery advice

Presentation is like driving a car - virtually everybody can learn to do it competently but some do it better than others. Essentially the key to delivering an effective presentation is practise. Obviously in this course we can only give you a very limited amount of practise but we hope that we can provide you with a basis for giving effective presentations. Note here that, whatever career you choose to follow nowadays (scientific or managerial), it is common to have to give presentations at various times in your career.

Below we give a number of hints which can help in delivering a presentation. If you are new to giving presentations then try to develop good habits now, by taking note of the points below and acting upon them.

- Fear - is a common emotion, especially in someone who has little experience of giving presentations. This fear has many causes (e.g. fear of drying up, fear of appearing stupid, fear of what the audience will think, etc) and is quite understandable. Basically this fear should fade (probably into just mild anxiety) with practise. Points you can also bear in mind to help you are:
  - the audience is sympathetic - they want you to succeed, overcome your fear and give an effective presentation
  - the fear will lessen as you get into the presentation
- Handouts - these provide a permanent record for the audience and eliminate (to a large extent) the need for them to take their own notes. Personally I often prefer to issue handouts before the presentation, others prefer to issue them at the end of the presentation (but do tell the audience that you will be issuing a handout). An especially good idea is to make a copy of any overhead/pc slides you have prepared and hand them out.
- Timing - it is usually best to leave your watch in a convenient place where it can be consulted without it appearing obvious to the audience that you are looking at it. In any event be sure that you have some means of checking the passage of time.
- Control - remember that as the person giving the presentation you are in effective control and feel free to control both the physical situation and the audience (e.g. lights on/off, moving the audience to the side where they will get a better view, asking for questions only at the end of the presentation, etc).
- Eye contact - it is important to maintain eye contact with the audience - look at them, not at the floor/screen/etc.
- Visual aids – overhead/pc slides can be very effective especially if they:
  - are clearly legible from the back of the audience - use large letters (i.e. a large font), bold lines, colour

- highlight key points (there is little point in trying to crowd a lot of information onto a slide)

Any points on a particular slide that need emphasising can be highlighted by placing a pen on the slide (if it is a transparency on an overhead projector) or by using a large pointer (or a laser pointer) and pointing to the screen.

- Practise - as the key to effective presentation in the long-term is practise so practise is important in the short-term. You should practise a particular presentation several times in order to:
  - get the timing right
  - refine the material (content) being presented
  - refine any visual aids that are being used
  - check gestures and mannerisms (get a friend to watch you and comment or use a mirror)
  - become familiar with the material being presented.
- Notes - by notes we mean your personal notes to which you refer during the course of your presentation. Typically these notes contain the outline of your presentation and any key points that you need to remember to emphasise. You should find that practising the presentation means that you will only occasionally need to refer to these notes. Typically presentations composed mainly of overhead/pc slides need less notes since the slides themselves act as reminders of what you intended to say. Some people prefer to put their notes on small cards since these are easier to handle than pieces of paper.
- Questions - always allow the audience to ask questions (finish early to allow time if necessary). Often the best strategy, especially if you do not feel confident in giving presentations, is to tell the audience that you will take questions at the end of the presentation. The problem with allowing questions during the course of the presentation is that they can disrupt both the timing of, and your confidence in, your carefully practised presentation.
- Use of the overhead/pc projector - a common mistake here is to obscure the view of the screen from certain sections of the audience. To get over this:
  - if you know that you will be standing in the same position and obscuring the screen a lot then move the audience so that they can see
  - make an intentional effort to move around so you are not always in the same position
- Style - if you give many presentations you will find that you develop your own personal style (I, for example, walk up and down a lot and use my hands to emphasise points). There are probably no hard and fast rules here - essentially I would regard it as being a case of balancing the style with which you feel most comfortable against annoying too many of the audience with your style.