

Communication Handbook - Factsheet 12

Version 1 – April 2012

Presentations and Speeches

- ⇒ How to prepare for presentations and speeches
 - Messages
 - Efficient use of time
 - Structure
- ⇒ How to keep the audience involved
- ⇒ Physical, vocal and visual delivery
- ⇒ How to handle nerves and fears



Good presentation skills are particularly important for MED projects with end-of-project events to manage and results to present. These skills are also scarce and difficult to build – partly because there are many rules for what goes wrong, but no set rules for what works well every time. This guide lays out the core guiding principles to build skills appropriate to each person and the wide variety of situations in which we need to perform. It draws on perspectives from psychology, linguistics, sociology, and hard practical experience to help you create simple, clear and compelling presentations and deliver them effectively.

⇒ ***The content is the key. In the professional world most audiences are much too sharp for superficialities of presentation to make much difference. Effective presentation content depends on identifying a handful of clear and memorable messages around which to build everything else. While it is important not to squander a good presentation with a limp delivery, the key to a great presentation is the preparation, structure and planning.***

A key theme is the need to operate as a **communicator** rather than a presenter. That means being planning and responding to the needs of those on the receiving end, and performing collaboratively by paying attention to feedback. The heart or thrust of your presentation should be about your audience, not about you.

On the day, the goal should be to put across an impression of your true, positive and professional personality, without any tricks or contrivances. Good presenting is individual: build on what is already there without introducing any artificial elements. Then inject some energy: be expressive and enthusiastic to excite and inspire your audience.

Aim for **“enhanced conversation”** as a tone or flavour. “Conversational” deliveries seem relaxed, spontaneous, comfortable, confident, responsive to the situation and naturally expressive. Have a conversation with your audience. They may not actually say anything, but make them feel consulted, questioned, challenged, argued with; then they will stay awake and attentive. Your job as a presenter is to communicate with your audience and stimulate them into wanting to get the information you have, not just to present that information at them.

Performance is the icing on the cake, and a natural skill. We all dramatise our actions in everyday life, whether it be the punch-line of a joke, or when giving a present or opening a door for someone. It is an enactment, not a phoney façade, but a natural dramatisation of expression, involving timing, planning and visualising our impact upon others. This is the skill on which to build presentation.

Planning and preparation

Preparation is crucial for delivering a great presentation. Many of the best natural presenters appear relaxed and spontaneous precisely because of how much effort they put in beforehand. Even with material and situations with which you are very confident, neglecting the planning stage is always risky.

Messages

Human beings are surprisingly inefficient at taking on board new information in a limited amount of time. For instance, a typical newspaper story or broadcast news item will revolve around only two or three basic ideas. Much more than that, and readers, viewers and listeners become confused or bored. The same principles apply to presentations, which should be constructed around **no more than three key messages**.

What is a message? A message is a guiding idea or theme or proposition that you want to convey to a specific audience. It is the essence of what you want to say.

Boiling down everything that you want to say to a few key messages can be a difficult process, but it pays dividends in clarity and impact. The most important aspect of most presentations is not what happens in the room but what happens later as a result: we intend to change attitudes or behaviour. Messages are the foundations of all effective communication: in order to be understood they must be clear and simple; in order to be remembered and acted upon they must be consistent and repeated. Messages do not exist in a vacuum: they are aimed at specific audiences.

Preparation

Psychologists and presentation experts identify three phases of preparation:

1. **Incubation** involves drawing together all of the information, ideas, basic facts and figures for a presentation and chewing them over mentally – leaving them to stew for a while. This can begin with a brainstorming process, a first stab at generating key messages and a vague structure for the presentation, but without imposing too much order. You may talk it over informally with colleagues or friends. The mind imposes order on information unconsciously over a period of time, and through this incubation process a natural structure and order for the presentation of this information often emerges by itself.
2. **Illumination** is the arrival of inspiration after a period of incubation. The final presentation does not spring forth fully formed, of course, but often you will arrive at a moment of realisation when the foundations of a presentation fall naturally into place: an order of concepts, ideas for how to get them across in ways that can be easily identified and remembered.
3. **Refinement** is the formal process by which this framework is transformed into a presentation, practiced and prepared for delivery.

Because a presentation is delivered orally, use speech and conversation as a tool for preparation. Talk to people about your presentation, try out ideas and arguments and phrases informally to get a feel for what works naturally.

Efficient use of time in preparation

Allow sufficient time for incubation. Often time requirements determine that we must prepare for presentations up against a deadline, but just as often we create or exacerbate these pressures ourselves through procrastination or poor time management. A well-structured and prepared presentation takes time, not just intensive work shortly beforehand, but spread out over a period leading up to the presentation. Ideas need time to develop unconsciously.

Allow sufficient time for practice. Incubation matters not just for the preparation of messages and structure, but also for practice. A good presentation must be tried and tested several times to become smooth and natural in delivery, and practice – like most kinds of learning – is most effective when distributed over time. If you are going to rehearse a presentation five times, you will learn it much better by doing so once a day for five days than five times in one day on the day before its final delivery.

Allow a margin for error. A preparation schedule needs breathing space, in case other work priorities intrude on your time, or the facts and situation for the presentation change and you need to adapt on the run. “Writer’s block” and “speaker’s block” can take time to overcome.

Structure

Your key messages will provide a frame for the content of the presentation. But how much information can you fit in? That will be determined by the time available. In some cases you will have a defined time slot; in others you can determine this for yourself. Either way, it is important to be concise in order to convey as much information effectively as possible. Bear in mind that people’s attention will start to wane after about 20 minutes.

In English, most people speak around 150 words per minutes. Fewer than 100 words can become boring and monotonous; more than 200 is hard to follow. That means we can convey roughly the equivalent of two normal paragraphs of text per minute. That could mean one element (message, idea, illustration or piece of evidence) per minute.

About 25 percent of a presentation should be for the introduction and conclusion (see below); the remaining 75 percent divided among the key ideas in the body of your presentation. So for a 10-minute presentation you have time for seven or eight elements; for 20 minutes, about 15 elements.

Make full use of the time, but be realistic about what can be conveyed effectively. Focus and select the most important information. Choose information that is best suited for oral delivery. Leave data, routine or technical information for the

handout; use your spoken presentation for meaning and explanation. Choose aspects of the brief that are best suited to this audience and occasion: their needs, attitudes, knowledge and expectations.

Making a short presentation can be just as challenging as a long one precisely because of the need to cut it to its bare bones and yet remain compelling and get the message across.

Getting started: presentation points

Where a clear structure does not present itself logically or immediately, the most effective strategy is to generate many ideas by brainstorming. Think up every possible idea, without limits or order. The goal is quantity, not quality at this stage: this is the generation of raw material.

Different people have different styles for organising material at this stage. Some use a visual mind-map or concept map, like a spider diagram with lines and colours linking ideas; others use indented lists; others use moveable components like Post-It notes that can be shifted and rearranged on a wall.

Look for obvious clusters or natural categories. The goal is to generate many ideas, label and rearrange them, rework, adjust, select and cull until you have up to three major groupings that cover the most important ideas and can fit into your time frame. Too few points and you will lack structure and organisation and waste the opportunity to cover more ground. Too many and you will lack focus and your audience will not remember them. Exclude those that are less relevant, and focus on those that are necessary to prove your point. Stick to the point. For any detail that you cannot communicate in 20 minutes, try another medium such as handouts or brochures.

The end product should be presentation points focused on your key messages that are distinct and exclusive, central and indispensable to your agenda. There should be little or no overlap between the elements, in the interests of clarity and efficiency of presentation. Select main points that are mutually exclusive: each idea should fit in only one place.

Arrange your presentation points

Presentation points need to be arranged and structured appropriately in order to maximise effectiveness, logical persuasion, and the unfolding of premises and arguments. This can be achieved either through a topical pattern (one that arises naturally from the materials, as is most common), or using one of a variety of traditional or formal persuasive patterns.

Traditional

1. Chronological: by time
 - a. narrative unfolding over time;
 - b. past-present-future
 - c. step-by-step process
2. Spatial: by location
 - a. Geographic
 - b. Conceptual areas
3. Cause-effect:
 - a. origins to manifestation
 - b. Problem-solution

Topical

1. Elements have no pattern except their relationship to the topic
2. Listing the components that add up to argument
3. Combining aspects of cause-effect, problem-solution, etc
4. Pros and cons

Build your presentation points into an outline

A common pitfall in presentations is that the audience understands your overall topic but cannot recognise, understand or recall your specific points or arguments. Your presentation points must be clear propositions that can be evaluated true or false, not questions or vague assertions. Make them **full declarative sentences** and turn them into a full sentence outline, organised hierarchically:

1. Full sentence point
 - a. Full sentence sub-point
 - i. evidence
 - ii. evidence
 - b. Full sentence sub-point
 - i. evidence
 - ii. evidence
 - c. Full sentence sub-point
 - i. evidence
 - ii. evidence
2. Full sentence point
 - a. Full sentence sub-point
 - i. evidence
 - b. Full sentence sub-point
 - i. evidence
3. Full sentence point
 - a. Full sentence sub-point
 - i. evidence
 - b. Full sentence sub-point
 - i. evidence

Link your presentation points with transitions

A presentation should flow smoothly and seamlessly, and to achieve this you need to fill the gaps between your logical elements. The audience is also much more likely to follow and take on board your messages if they remain constantly aware of what stage of the argument they are at. To achieve this, good presenters make frequent use of transitions: verbal signposting to tell audiences where they are, and where they are going. You can't use too many transitions. They serve to tie the presentation together and formalise its structure. Give the audience a verbal map - explain the point of your presentation, indicate where you are going and how you will get there.

Also make use of **internal previews and summaries**, which serve a similar purpose: tell the audience what you are going to tell them, remind them what you are telling them, and at the end, tell them what you have told them. Repetition is the key to understanding and memory.

The introduction

Audiences make judgments very quickly based on first impressions. Psychologists call it the "primacy effect": given a list of pieces of information, human beings consistently recognise and remember the first items best. The introduction is crucial because it must grasp their attention and establish your credibility, fast. The introduction should develop a relationship with your audience and orient them to your topic. An introduction should take 10 to 15 percent of your speaking time. The intro must settle these five questions:

- ⇒ Are they listening?
- ⇒ Do they want to keep listening to me?
- ⇒ Do they want to know more about this topic?
- ⇒ Do they understand where I'm coming from?
- ⇒ Do they understand where I'm going?

Hook their attention

- ⇒ The first few moments really are crucial to the success of the presentation: even before you speak, in the moment that attention orients to you as you prepare to start. Develop a rapport fast that prepares your audience to listen to you. Plan first actions and sentences very carefully. Command attention from the first words. The first sentence you use, as in a novel, should immediately capture the imagination of your audience. It has to be one of the strongest sentences in your tale. It's the hook to help you reel in those whose imagination you're trying to capture. Be imaginative or dramatic, and consider the following approaches to the opening few words:
 - ⇒ Suspense
 - ⇒ Novelty
 - ⇒ Humour
 - ⇒ Conflict
 - ⇒ Story

- ⇒ Quotation
- ⇒ Startling statement
- ⇒ Provocative question

Establish a good relationship with your audience

Try to create a personal bond, establish yourself as a human being rather than a distant and aloof speaker. Humanise yourself. Create an atmosphere of collaboration and dialogue with the audience: involve them. Generally, project the idea that “I’m doing the talking now, but I’m also here to learn from you as well as instruct”. The aim is to establish your credibility. In the process, to create a bond, you may wish to refer to the occasion or setting, refer to someone present, or use humour.

Motivate your audience towards your topic

All audiences start off thinking: “So what?” or “What’s it to me?”. You need to show them fast that the topic has a link to their own experiences and is worthy of attention.

It helps at an early stage to establish a context for your presentation, perhaps by fitting it into a familiar framework, or placing it historically. Then give the audience a framework for what you are going to explain, to smooth their understanding as it unfolds. Explicit previews of the content are often useful, especially for complex or technical material – unless it is so complex that later points only make sense after earlier ones have been explained.

The opening should give the audience a preview of what they will be told in the context of why they should care: how will they benefit, what problems will this information solve. Tempt them with brief snapshots of some interesting gems coming up in your presentation. State what your key points are going to be.

The mid-section

The body of the presentation is the guts of your argument, the battleground on which you will seek to establish and prove your messages and make the audience care about them enough to achieve your desired outcomes.

Think laterally about how to get your point across. The following are some tactics that are regularly effective:

- ⇒ Metaphor and simile
- ⇒ Irony
- ⇒ Contradiction
- ⇒ Humour (where appropriate)
- ⇒ Analogy
- ⇒ Colour
- ⇒ Link to topical events
- ⇒ Specific examples
- ⇒ People
- ⇒ Humanity

- ⇒ Characters
- ⇒ Anecdotes and stories
- ⇒ Memorable images

Metaphors and analogies are vital to communication. 'It's like climbing a greasy pole', for example, conveys far more than just literal meaning. It conveys image and feeling and enables others to empathise through similar experiences of their own.

Stories are a very powerful way to bring to life and make interesting even the driest of topics. People love stories because of the pictures they paint and because they bring added colour and enlightenment and even inspiration to a subject. Keep them short and simple but scintillating. Tailor a story to your audience so they can relate to it and therefore you and your theme more easily.

The conclusion

Conclusions carry the power of the “recency effect” – the flipside of the primacy effect is that the information that audiences hear last is also very likely to be remembered. The conclusion also provides logical and psychological closure, and ties all the threads together with a sense of completeness. Just like the introduction, it needs to be planned precisely, almost to the point of memorisation. Briefly summarise your main points, and make it a rousing call to action (if that is the purpose of the presentation) rather than just petering out. If you can think of a thought-provoking final thought or quote which resonates with your overall theme, this will make more impact still. Rehearse the end of the presentation and look the audience directly in the eye when you deliver it. Avoid fumbling with notes and additional 'by-the-way' points which greatly reduce the overall impact.

The conclusion has two main goals:

- ⇒ Logical closure: make sure they understand and agree
 - a. Summarise the main ideas of the speech
 - b. Re-establish the connection of the topic to a larger context: pull ideas together into a pattern, refer to broader implications or ramifications.
- ⇒ Psychological closure: make sure they feel and care
 - a. Remind the audience how the topic affects their lives
 - b. Make an appeal: a call to action.

The call to action is extremely important: it is your best opportunity to change the audience's behaviour or attitudes once they leave the room, which is usually the core aim of a presentation.

The clincher

The very last sentence is as important as the very first sentence. Deliver it firmly and decisively and from memory, maintaining eye contact. This is just as important as your opener. You need to end on a high note and therefore the close has to be as compelling as the opening. In fact, a brilliant close to a speech can, like a knock-

out punch at the end of disappointing boxing match, positively transform the audience's overall perception of the presentation. The conclusion must sum up what you have said, as a reminder of your key messages, and also inspire thought and action.

End as if you have done well. Do this even if you feel like you've done badly. First, you're probably the worst judge of how you've done, and second, the audience may not have made up their mind by this stage, so it is an opportunity not to be wasted.

How to convince and be credible?

Do	Don't
Leave no doubt the presentation is finished.	Apologise
Perhaps tie back to the attention getting line at the start: answer a question	Trail off
Return to opening joke or story	Introduce new info or ideas
Consider a proverb or quotation	Read it
Maintain eye contact	Make it too long
	Change the mood or style
	Say "in conclusion" until you really are at the conclusion.

Credibility

It is not just what you say, it's how you say it. You have structured your presentation to get the message across in a way that the key points can be easily identified and remembered. To achieve those goals, your style of delivery must establish your credibility. Sociologists identify many characteristics that distinguish speakers who are seen as "credible".

- ⇒ Competence
- ⇒ Dynamism
- ⇒ Intention
- ⇒ Personality
- ⇒ Intelligence
- ⇒ Authoritativeness
- ⇒ Extroversion

- ⇒ Trustworthiness
- ⇒ Composure
- ⇒ Sociability

Projecting credibility

1. Don't be afraid to blow your own trumpet. Tell the audience why you have authority to be speaking to them.
2. Demonstrate your knowledge by substantiating your messages thoroughly: show you have done your homework
3. Show yourself to be very well prepared and organised
4. Be especially careful to appear balanced and objective and consider opposing views
5. Explicitly address concern and goodwill towards the audience

Be aware of your image in all dealings with the audience, including informal chats beforehand. First impressions are especially important. Don't try to emulate others: audiences will spot easily if you are trying to be anything other than yourself. Everyone has their own style of speaking. Aim for a delivery style with which you feel comfortable; play to your strengths and control your weaknesses.

Language and style

Modern psychological theories point to language being the essence of thought. Words are not just for communicating, they are fundamental to thinking – so when preparing a presentation, don't just throw language in at the end. "Talk ideas into being": develop your ideas through language to get an effective end product.

First, know exactly what you want to convey. Second, decide how that will be most clearly conveyed to your audience. Use language that is both **clear** and **vivid**.

Be precise in word selection (without sounding pretentious) and careful with unfamiliar vocabulary, especially if speaking in a language that is not your native tongue.

Use specific and concrete language; minimise abstract words like love, freedom, justice, beauty.

Be economical with language. The bloated language of bureaucracy is everywhere: wordy, redundant, euphemistic. Use the fewest, most straightforward words that still effectively convey meaning. Make every word count

Avoid clichés and mixed metaphors

Personification: make it human. "The economy is limping", "Profits are hobbled by high fixed costs", "The wind is whispering".

Hyperbole: deliberate overstatement. "I have said it a million times..."

Use repetitive language or structure. This hammers home a point in a vivid and memorable way. E.g.: "How serious is the situation? Three of the mountaineers

have frostbite. What caused the problem? They pushed on for the summit. How could this be prevented? They should have turned back when the storm clouds gathered.”

No words or phrases are repeated, but the repeated format gives it momentum.

- ⇒ Do the same to introduce a series of paragraphs: “We must act now to ... We must act now to ... We must act now to ...”
- ⇒ End several sentences with the same words. E.g.: “What remains? Treaties have gone. The honour of nations has gone. Liberty has gone.” (-David Lloyd George)
- ⇒ Repeat key words within a sentence. E.g.: “But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate – we cannot consecrate – we cannot hallow this ground.” (-Abraham Lincoln)

Antithesis: contrast two ideas. Not...but; Not only...but also; Never...unless.

Use fresh language. Discard buzzwords and clichés and jargon.

Vary the rhythm: alternate long and short sentences.

Avoiding information overload: Trying to convey too much information causes, in this order: anxiety, confusion, irritability, anger at the source, and finally just tuning out. Your job is to sort and sift the facts and data and deliver it at the right pace in chunks of the right size for the audience to digest. Be selective, and use the following principles:

1. Give the audience a framework to organise information
2. Move from the simple to the complex
3. Move from the familiar to the unfamiliar
4. Pitch it at the right level of complexity. Learning proceeds best when the focus is just beyond the knowledge level of the group, so that it is challenging without being discouraging.
5. Use organisers:
 - a. Signposts. “First, I will ... Then, ...”
 - b. Enumeration. “There are three reasons for this. One, ...”
 - c. Acronyms. E.g. Soften: Smile, Open posture, Facial expression, Touch, Eye contact, Nodding.
 - d. Slogans, catchwords, memorable phrases
6. Use emphasis cues
 - a. This is very important
 - b. If you only remember one thing...
 - c. Speak louder or softer for emphasis
 - d. Pause before and after key ideas
 - e. Step forward
 - f. Use facial expression
7. Use examples liberally
8. Use analogies
9. Use multiple channels
 - a. Words

- b. Hands
- c. Visual aid
- d. Charts
- e. Recordings
- f. Video

10. Use repetition and redundancy

Attention and interest: It takes more than a snappy introduction to maintain interest, and you have to do more than just talk. Too much uninterrupted talk can lead to boredom even if your information is first class. Depending how alert your audience is, you will need to intervene to stop them wandering off at least once a minute, if you want undivided attention – which of course you do. Show a visual, tell a story, use a prop, move around, change the tone of your voice, change the pace, ask the audience to do something, write on a flip chart or demonstrate a process.

Following are some useful tactics for maintaining attention.

1. Activity or movement: lively behaviour and treatment of the content that makes it appear as if something is actually happening.
2. Reality: reference to actual people, events, places; being specific and concrete rather than abstract.
3. Proximity – drawing on what is close at hand; people in the room, current events, local references.
4. Familiarity – the use of recognised examples, well-known phrases, commonplace events.
5. Novelty – the opposite of the familiar; startling facts, odd turns of phrase, surprising images, unusual combinations.
6. Suspense – creating curiosity about what will happen next. Posing puzzles or provocative questions.
7. Conflict – setting up pros and cons, opposing viewpoints, competing schools of thought.
8. Humour – playful remarks, silly or exaggerated images, amusing plays on words, ironic twists of fate, entertaining stories.
9. Vital self interest – something that is important to listeners. Matters of survival, or saving them time, earning money, making life more pleasant.

Keep the audience involved

- ⇒ Use the names of people in the audience
- ⇒ Refer to the immediate setting or shared experience.
- ⇒ Use concrete examples rather than hypothetical ones to illustrate a point.
- ⇒ Ask questions, ask for a show of hands or a straw poll
- ⇒ Ask rhetorical questions
- ⇒ Ask listeners to visualise examples
- ⇒ Use the word “You”.
- ⇒ You’ve probably seen
- ⇒ Do you sometimes wonder
- ⇒ In your morning paper
- ⇒ “Has this ever happened to you...”

Physical delivery

Effective delivery is unobtrusive. The audience should attend to what you are saying, not to your grand gestures or beautiful voice. You do not need to put on a huge performance to give a good presentation, but you do need to go beyond your natural expression to project yourself. This is not acting: present your own personality, speak your own words, adapt to the response you receive. Performance is amplified conversation. Assume the role of the most lively, confident, poised, expressive side of yourself. Picture yourself describing an exciting event to friends. Imitate yourself at your most lively and animated. Develop and use your individual style: be authentic, and have your character and integrity show through: with added energy.

It should come naturally: we have more experience communicating than performing. We do it all the time. We don't have to think about our body language, voice patterns, and so on. This is evident in the paradox many of us will have noticed that a person can give a flat, dull, wooden presentation, and then become very animated in the question and answer session, as if when the pressure of the presentation itself was lifted they were able to relax as the delivery switched from performance to interaction. Relax and enjoy it from the start.

Your physical presence is an important component of your presentation. There is nothing less inspiring than a presenter who stands rigidly nailed to the spot. Your body language has just as much of an effect on an audience as your words and the way you express those words. If you walk on with your head down and shuffle uneasily to your stage, then you will be sending out a message which says that you're unsure of yourself. To generate and maintain attention and interest, you need to be animated: gesture and demonstrate to make your points.

Be conscious of your appearance and the message it sends – and above all, be natural and avoid distracting attention from your message.

Identify distracting habits

We all have idiosyncrasies and personal mannerisms, habits of movement – fiddling with glasses, twirling hair, tapping fingers, and so on. In isolation they are fine. It is the repetition of them that becomes distracting. Get feedback to identify any that you need to control.

Gestures

The overall energy of a presentation is enhanced by the use of gestures and limited movement. When under the spotlight, and concentrating hard, the temptation is to remain rooted to the spot. Dynamic gestures and movements reinforce the ideas of the speech. Make gestures larger to a larger crowd – without overdoing it to the point where it appears contrived or conspicuous. Don't stand as if with two frying pans tied to them. Gesture as you normally would in conversation.

Posture

Stand or sit with a relaxed but alert and purposeful posture. Standing is better while presenting: it focuses attention on you and gives you a better view of the audience. If you can be comfortable without a lectern, great. If the psychological support helps, take advantage of it.

Movement

It is usually good to move for the same reasons as for gesture. Movement adds variety and emphasis. You can move toward or into a certain section of the audience. It relieves boredom and tension. Movement works best at transitional moments, to signal a change in mood, content, or form.

Movement should be purposeful, relevant and motivated by the content of your speech. Sometimes speakers wander around the platform without apparent aim, creating a distraction. Don't pace around, shuffle or rock. Don't move when you are expecting your audience to concentrate or digest something technical or difficult. If you want to make an important point and you have been moving about, you can then stop still for dramatic effect.

Maintain eye contact

Be familiar enough with the material that you can look at as many members of the audience as possible, as often as possible. Eye contact denotes openness and interest; looking away or down is a sign of insincerity or shiftiness. Children do not look you in the eye when they lie. If you find eye contact hard to sustain, look at people's foreheads, or between audience members, so it seems to them as if you are looking into their eyes. Real eye contact is better though, as it enables you to see listeners' faces to get feedback on how the message is being received.

At the start of the speech, when you are getting into your stride, find a few listeners who are responding positively. Look at them and use their nods and smiles to help you through this period. Then widen your focus. Don't skim. Look at individual people for at least three seconds.

Aim to have eye contact 85 percent of the time, and especially at the most important moments: introduction, conclusion, and key messages.

Facial expressions

Slightly exaggerate facial expressions. Smile genuinely to reinforce your message: it is one of the easiest ways to establish a rapport, show goodwill, and put audiences at ease. But don't overdo it like George W Bush, who forces a contrived little smirk at the end of every sentence.

Our voices and facial expressions will naturally convey feelings. The best approach to expressing them is to allow emotions to arise spontaneously as you speak. The feelings come from your conviction and by tapping into your experiences. Don't force them. The audience will probably detect it if you are being less than authentic.

Vocal delivery

Speak clearly, correctly and conversationally: don't put on a performance. A presenter's voice should sound like private speech, but exaggerated to fill the room. Vary your voice for interest and emphasis. Try to eliminate useless space-filling sounds and phrases: Um. Er. You know. I mean. So to speak. Etcetera. Speak loudly enough for everyone to hear, and loudly enough to sound especially confident: usually louder than normal speech. Broadcast your voice to the furthest corners of the room; you will naturally keep your head up and open your mouth wide.

Speak at a rate the audience can follow, which is typically a little slower than in normal conversation. In any case, being loud and enunciating distinctly will require more pauses for breath. Go more slowly than you think you need to, particularly with as adrenalin tends to speed us up. Your audience need the time to assimilate and interpret what you are saying. Practise words that are unfamiliar or easy to stumble over. Change and movement are interesting, so vary your voice.

Vary your pitch to convey interest and confidence.

Vary your rate of speaking to establish a mood or add emphasis. Slowly sounds thoughtful or deliberate, or imparts a sense of drama. Speaking fast shows excitement and activity.

Vary your volume: raise or lower for effect, usually for a punch-line or attention grabber before something important.

Visuals

Good visual and audio-visual aids can enhance a presentation to the extent that studies have found increases in information retention of up to 50 percent. Bad visual aids can make a presentation unbearably tedious. One major risk is that the presenter becomes secondary to the slides. Do not narrate your PowerPoint. It should not duplicate your verbal presentation. Do not use it as a prompt or script for your own presentation: that is the purpose of private speech notes. Speak to the audience, not the screen: the visuals should support the speaker, not vice versa. Resist stock clipart. The principle returns that nothing should distract from you and your message. Do not use too many slides.

Use visuals to give a big picture quickly: graphics, pictures, cartoons, bar charts, and key words. Use your own words to elaborate. Visuals should be simple, clear, and with a defined purpose: to support the presenter. They should be large enough to be seen by the whole room. Text should be brief and minimal: single words and phrases. While there is text on the screen, the audience will be reading it, not listening to you. Clear, simple pictures, graphs, charts and illustrations are most effective. Do not crowd the screen: use lots of white space. Animations and reveals should be subtle and used for particular effect. Maintain styles and continuity

between slides. Use simple typefaces, and no more than two fonts. If possible, have a colleague turn the pages so you are free to move around and concentrate. Use bold colour. Make eye contact with the audience: do not turn to the screen. Keep up the pace and keep talking as the slides are changed. Practice with them. Make sure they look attractive and professional.

Think laterally with visuals. Consider using a cartoon or striking photograph to illustrate a point rather than writing it out in text bullet points to repeat verbally. Coordinate them carefully with your presentation: don't confuse the audience by talking on one subject while they are looking at a slide illustrating something else. Google Images and Microsoft both have a good bank of photos that you can use free of charge, there are other providers such as Getty Images and photos.com that have royalty free photos that can be accessed for a subscription fee.

Nerves and fear

Not many of us actively like giving presentations. Most people feel neutral or slightly negative about them as a way of passing our short time on earth. Many of us become nervous at the prospect. One in five people has a fear of speaking that is acute enough to affect their performance. One in 20 is effectively paralysed by fear.

The best course of action is to first understand, analyse and accept the natural nervousness around public speaking; then manage it by preparing, relaxing and visualising.

Fear in perspective

Fear is usually worst before the speech and right at the start, during the introduction. As you get into your stride and the audience responds, it recedes. This knowledge can help control apprehension: it will get better.

Nerves can be a good thing. They show that you're keyed up and that your body and mind are ready to perform. We all want to do our best and not make a fool of ourselves.

It is hard to understand and define what is so scary about public speaking, which is one reason that it can be hard to deal with. Try to analyse and isolate specific fears that can be translated into problems to solve. What are you afraid will happen? What will be the consequences? What can you do to prevent that happening?

- ⇒ Afraid visual aids won't be clear – so fix them.
- ⇒ Afraid not properly prepared or practised – so prepare and practise.
- ⇒ Fear of speaking in a foreign language – so prepare and practise.

A lot of fear is to do with failing to meet our own high standards. It can help to recognise this as a positive motivating factor.

Another common factor is the fear of negative evaluation, which translates into a kind of fear of the entire audience.

Remember:

- ⇒ An audience is just a group of individuals. They respond to you no differently than they would in small groups or individually.
- ⇒ Most audiences are supportive. They want to hear a good speech – they are rooting for you. They want you to be confident. They empathise with nervous speakers and this makes them feel embarrassed – so they want you to succeed. Audiences are also sometimes impressed or appreciative that you have made the effort to speak in a foreign language.
- ⇒ Try consciously to change the way you picture the audience from “critic” to “recipient” of your presentation, and your purpose from “perform” to “share”. You are talking with the audience, not performing for them.
- ⇒ Centre your thoughts on hypothetical audience members who are sincere and responsive.

The physical effects of nervousness and fear often stem from a “fight or flight” response.

These can include:

- ⇒ Rapid heart rate
- ⇒ Dizziness
- ⇒ Butterflies in the stomach
- ⇒ Trembling
- ⇒ Sweating
- ⇒ Dry mouth
- ⇒ Muscular tension in the throat: quaver or strain in voice

The most effective solution to these physical effects is physical activity. To calm your nerves beforehand, take a brisk walk or pace up and down, or clench and unclench your hands (out of view of the audience, in case they draw any conclusions from such apparently strange rituals). During the presentation itself, you can make a physical outlet for your nerves through the use of gesture and vigour.

Also consider specific relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, yoga, visualising serene settings, imagining warmth and heaviness. These are very individual: find out what works for you.

Fear often makes you visualise the worst outcome. Do the opposite using positive self suggestion, in the same way that sportspeople find it useful to visualise victory. “I will be calm, relaxed, conversational and authoritative, my voice will be clear and assured, and the audience will smile and nod attentively, laugh, applaud and feel motivated.” Build in contingencies, such as, If I forget what I am saying, I will check my notes and continue. Visualise also the relief and elation you will feel afterwards.

Resist the temptation to use alcohol or medication to calm nerves. It frequently backfires and may adversely affect your performance, and it does not address the root causes of the problem.

“Drying up” is a common fear – stopping dead in mid presentation and losing the way. Some people find it helpful to memorise a “saver story” that can be slotted in at any stage while they reorient themselves. Otherwise, you can always fall back on your key messages, and your presentation notes and lectern are an ever present safety net.



Plan and structure your presentation so that it can be followed easily by your audience. Before you finalise your materials examine these key questions:

Who is your audience and what preconceptions do they bring?

What precisely is the central issue?

To what degree does the audience understand the issues and terminology?

What are main ideas that need to be expressed and which ideas can be left out?

How are you going to structure your content so that your messages are consistent and clear?