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What Makes an Effective Presentation?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Reading this chapter will help you to:

- understand the concept of effective presentations
- list the characteristics that contribute to effective presentations
- recognize how each characteristic contributes to the overall effectiveness of your presentation

What are effective presentations?

Effective presentations achieve their objectives and usually bring some benefit and learning to all the people involved in them, whether presenters, audience or tutors. They will also earn good marks if they are assessed. Presentations need to be interesting and useful to the learning situation but they can also be enjoyable, even memorable. You may remember more of the content of your peers' presentations than the content delivered by the lecturers. You may also remember the content of your own presentations more than the content of lectures you have attended. This may be because of the anxiety levels associated with presentations and the amount of preparation and rehearsal time needed for the content to be developed.

We have chosen the following characteristics of effective presentations. These have been identified through research with several cohorts of our students and through our own experience of developing and assessing student presentations as assignments on their academic courses. These characteristics are given in the order of preparing and delivering the presentation rather than in any order of importance.

- Careful planning and preparation
- Good time management

- Relevant and interesting content
- Clear structure
- Good communication skills
- Appropriate use of technologies
- Clear supporting documentation
- Suitable audience participation

All of these will apply to a greater or lesser extent depending on your situation and the purpose of your presentation. We suggest that you read and review the detail of each characteristic noting the points you think are most relevant for you. Cross-references are provided to the chapters that provide further detail and advice.

Careful planning and preparation

Planning and preparation usually involve some research and choosing or rejecting suitable content. These are important tasks which will probably take much longer than you first thought. It is outside the scope of this book to discuss research techniques in any depth but it is useful to recognize here that research does take time and may involve some of the following activities before content can be chosen, created and presented:

- searching databases and on-line resources for articles
- use of libraries for reviewing relevant resources
- tutorials with academic staff to develop new knowledge
- contact with and visits to organizations
- interviews with experts
- construction and testing of models
- developing experiments and analysing results

This all sounds daunting but we list these to encourage you to see the presentation as the end-product of a range of tasks carried out, rather than as a single event. The type and level of your course of study will almost certainly influence the type of preparation needed as will the amount of marks to be earned and credits that can be achieved. Chapter 5 outlines 10 steps for the planning and preparation stage.

Good time management

Time management is important for preparing and delivering good presentations yet it is often a source of stress for students. For your presentation, good time management is important in two quite different ways: in the planning and preparation stages; and time allocated for delivering the presentation.

1 Planning and preparation stages In some situations you may have just a few days to prepare for the presentation, for others you may be given several weeks. Each brings benefits and problems. A short amount of time creates pressures on what you can achieve and may limit the quality of the final presentation. A longer amount of time can result in a lack of focus with tasks being left until closer to the delivery date, then a period of frenzied activity leading up to the event. However much time you are given to prepare, you may find it useful to create a time plan or a chart of your intended progress. This could involve:

- listing all of the tasks that need to be completed before the date of the presentation
- placing these tasks in an order of priority
- allocating the time needed to complete each of these tasks
- checking your progress regularly
- reallocating the remaining time to make sure that you complete all of the tasks

Time will probably be needed for reading to increase your understanding of the topic. However, to be able to present, explain or teach that content to someone else in the audience needs even deeper levels of understanding and this will probably use quite a large amount of your preparation time.

If you are part of a group, some planning meetings will need to be arranged and communication through e-mails set up. Time will also be needed for preparing and testing visuals, models or demonstration materials and for rehearsing the use of technologies. Handouts and other supporting documents may need to be compiled, edited and copies made. See Chapters 7, 8 and 9 for more detailed discussion on these tasks.

It is also important to allow for some rehearsal time to ensure a more polished performance and greater confidence. This is especially important for a group presentation where timing will be important. We discuss this briefly below, and in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

2 Time allocated for delivering the presentation In most presentations, it is usually better to deliver less content at a reasonable pace, than too much content at a faster pace that may leave the audience feeling overwhelmed and confused. How you use the time during the presentation will be influenced by how much content you intend to cover, the structure of this content and the amount of audience participation expected. Also, how you create and use the supporting documentation will influence how you make use of the time during your presentation. If time is short, you could cover a few important points at a general level during the presentation then suggest that the audience read the more detailed handouts in their own time.

Allocating and managing the performance time can be even more of a problem for a group presentation. In some situations where several group presentations will be given in a fixed amount of time, the tutor may stop the presentation when the allotted time has been used, regardless of how much of the presentation has been delivered. If this happens, you will almost certainly lose marks or be penalized in some way.

This emphasizes the importance of rehearsing and editing. During rehearsal, each person will need to be timed so that time for one part of the presentation is not somehow used by one of the other presenters. If each presenter is allocated five minutes for their part, they should be timed during the rehearsals so that some changes can be made if they overrun. We discuss group work in more detail in Chapter 4.

If you are delivering the presentation alone, you will probably be judged on how the time has been used. Has there been enough time for the difficult content or was so much time used at the start on the preliminary information and the most important content appears rushed and too brief? As you develop the content you will probably become more certain about the best use of the time and the tutor may give you some guidance on this in a tutorial.

Remember that if you are one of several presentations at a conference or with other members of your cohort, you will not be popular for overrunning on your time slot. The time will need to be recovered probably from another presentation or from social time such as refreshment or activity breaks. In an interview situation, how close you keep to the time allocated to each candidate may earn you marks. Overrunning may cause you to lose a few marks!

Relevant and interesting content

You may find it useful to create the content in the following ways:

- decide what to include and what to leave out
- choose examples to provide interest and improve understanding
- provide links to further sources of information

Decide what to include and what to leave out For many subject areas there is usually much more content than can be delivered within the time allocated for the presentation. You will need to set your chosen content within the context of the module studied and make sure that it is relevant, accurate and interesting to the audience. It might be useful in your introduction to outline the reasons for your choice of content and the emphasis of the presentation. If you have enough time, it could also be useful to explain very briefly how other content was considered and why it was rejected.

Choose examples to provide interest and improve understanding There is a lot of research evidence that shows how using examples improves our understanding and learning. You will need to think about how to use examples in the presentation and where to place them in the structure of the content.

You can use examples to explain how they improved your own understanding of the topic. Remember, if you found examples helped your own understanding, this will probably be the same for your audience. How you use the examples is usually very important when the presentation is assessed and a portion of the marks may be given for how examples are used. Think about using them in a critical and analytical way, instead of just describing them. Just listing or describing some examples can become tedious for the audience.

It can be helpful at the start of a presentation to use examples that the audience will already understand. This helps them to review their existing knowledge. You can then move on to use new and perhaps more complex examples to extend their thinking. Also, think about how you can use some topical examples to keep their interest and attention. Remember, however relevant or important the content is to the purpose of the presentation, it could still be incredibly boring for the audience to listen to.

Provide links to further sources of information It is usually helpful to provide links to useful sources of information that audience members can follow up in their own time. These sources could relate to content that you have not been able to include but can be used for further reading and knowledge development.

You may also give links to useful websites and perhaps give some brief evaluation for why a source is especially useful. Use this approach to save their time yet indicate the volume and type of information that is available. Even if you only provide this type of information in the handouts, it shows evidence of your own research and may be useful to some members of the audience in the future. See Chapters 7 and 8 for more discussion on these suggestions.

Clear structure

A clear structure usually helps the audience to gain a quick understanding of the content of the presentation. Provide a clear outline or overview of the presentation so that they understand the progression of the topic and how it relates to a wider picture. Links can be made to what the audience already know and understand. It may also be helpful to tell them what you expect them to understand by the end of the presentation by

stating your aims and objectives at the start. This is especially important in academic presentations where learning outcomes may also need to be identified.

Provide a brief but clear introduction to the topic. Divide the content to be covered into sections that are relevant to the knowledge but that also enable pauses for reflection and opportunities for reviewing key issues. Provide links between the different sections then draw the presentation to a conclusion, perhaps by reviewing the themes covered, summarizing results or emphasizing the most important points or future issues and concerns.

There is much research evidence to show that we recall and remember more detail from the beginning and ending of presentations and lectures than in the middle. This can be problematic as the deep content may be placed in this middle part. There are techniques that can help you with this and we discuss them in more detail in Chapter 7. However, the general advice is to use several beginnings and endings throughout the presentation by structuring the content well and changing the approach or activity periodically to keep the attention of the audience. Opportunities for this approach will be limited in a short presentation but the principles still apply and being aware of these techniques emphasizes the importance of having a clear structure.

Good communication skills

For communication to be effective, the content needs to be clearly understood, meaningful and interesting to the audience. Effective communication in presentations needs a combination of content that fits the purpose, and good presentation and communication skills. To achieve this, you will need to consider several questions:

- What is the purpose of the presentation and what is it that you need to communicate in the allotted time?
- What is the current knowledge level of the audience and what new knowledge or awareness do you want the audience to have gained from listening to or seeing your presentation?
- What is the most effective way to communicate this knowledge? For example, is it more useful to show pictures, use models, sound, speech or text?

There are many influences on how well we communicate and on how well we are understood by our audience. It is useful to consider these influences under three broad areas:

- 1 Verbal communications.
- 2 Visual communications.
- 3 Non-verbal communications.

1 **Verbal communications**

We suggest five principles here:

- **Limit your use of jargon.** Generally speaking, to be understood, the presenter needs to use vocabulary that is familiar to the audience. Too much jargon can distract the audience while they try to understand new meanings and applications.
- **Explain new or complex terms.** When you use familiar words and phrases the audience will understand your content much more quickly. You can also introduce new vocabulary and give brief explanations with examples, as each one is introduced. In this way, you are extending the audience's knowledge and demonstrating your own knowledge to the tutor. You could decide to create a Glossary that provides brief descriptions of the terms used in your presentation. Give this to the audience with other handouts that you have created.
- **Speak clearly.** Speak a little slower than you do in everyday conversations with friends and colleagues. This will give the audience time to listen and understand what you are saying while getting used to your style of speech.
- **Use an interesting tone of voice.** If you sound interesting you will probably make the content interesting. Showing some enthusiasm for the topic can generate interest from the audience.
- **Finish sentences.** During communication with friends and colleagues we often do not need to finish sentences because they finish them for us or can make an accurate guess at the meanings without hearing everything spelt out. We may interrupt them or be interrupted ourselves. Generally, we get used to this style of communication and compensate for it by asking questions or for repetition of something we have not understood. In a presentation you will be expected to present the content using complete sentences. Whilst this may seem obvious, we have attended many events where speakers adopt an informal approach and pause before sentences are finished, leaving the audience guessing! This can be very irritating and exhausting to try to work out the correct meanings. Practise and rehearse completing your sentences and this will not be a problem for you.

For more discussion of these points read Chapter 3.

2 **Visual communications**

We discuss this in more detail in Chapters 8 and 9.

When you think about what makes presentations effective, it will be useful to consider how you can use images to communicate more effectively.

At this stage it will be useful to remember these principles:

- **Use images to improve understanding.** Sometimes, it is easier to use a picture instead of words to improve audience understanding. When you show a picture, you

can ask them a question or suggest they think about the image in a certain way. You can then remain silent while they think about the image or the task you have set them. Images can also be used to direct audience attention away from you and onto the image on the screen. This may help to steady your nerves as it gives you a few seconds to perhaps take some deep breaths or check your notes.

- **Use images to save time.** If there is only a short amount of time you could include images as a quick way to cover some of the content. You have probably heard of the phrase, ‘*a picture paints a thousand words*’ and this is very relevant to a student presentation.
- **Use images for interest.** Images use the visual sense whereas sound and speech use the auditory sense. Providing content in a variety of formats means that the audience has to use of a range of senses. This keeps them active in the process of receiving the presentation. We all have preferences and using a variety of communication approaches ensures a wider appeal to different members of the audience.
- **Use images for impact.** Images are more relevant for some topics than others but even if only a few can be included, they can be useful to create pauses and breaks in the delivery, generate discussion themes or make a lasting impression.

3 Non-verbal communications You will also need to think about non-verbal communication, that is how you communicate using body language. There is a large amount of research in this area and you will probably not have the time to read about it while preparing your presentation. However, there are some key principles that you can use to improve your non-verbal communication during the presentation.

- **Choose whether to stand or sit.** In some situations such as in a seminar, you may be one of a group who sit in a circle or around a table. Check with the tutor what the best approach is. In many student presentations standing will be expected. Whether you sit or stand, you should try to convey some control and authority for your performance. This will be especially important for an interview presentation and a Viva.
- **Keep still.** Having agreed on the best position, try to keep still and stay in one place rather than moving around. Swaying backward and forward becomes distracting as does taking steps forward, backward or from side to side. For a group presentation, decide where each person will stand, who will move and when. Rehearse these changes to avoid collisions. The audience may laugh if this happens but you will probably not be amused!
- **Keep your hands still.** We all have a tendency to flap our hands while we speak. This is natural in most situations and while it might be used for enthusiasm, it can be a distraction during a presentation. If you do not use your hands to operate the technology or demonstrate something, hold cards or papers or clasp your hands lightly in front of you to reduce the waving around. Avoid all repetitive behaviours such as clasping and unclasping hands, folding your arms, using your pockets and shuffling your notes.

- **Face the audience as much as possible.** They will pick up non-verbal clues from your facial expression. This will also help you to 'sweep the group' by making brief eye contact with the audience. If you use PowerPoint do not turn to view the screen as your voice will become muffled. Use the image on the console or create paper images if you need them for memory purposes so that you do not need to turn to the screen. 'Sweeping' the audience frequently will help you to relax and may give you some feedback on what they find interesting or boring.

We discuss the use of body language in Chapter 3.

Appropriate use of technologies

In this chapter we use the term 'technologies' in a generic way. It could mean a medical aid such as a dummy in a first aid presentation, a specialist piece of equipment such as a sewing machine or food blender or the widely used Microsoft PowerPoint. In each of the examples given in Chapter 1 we list the type of technology that you would be expected to use in that situation.

Chapter 9 provides some detailed discussion on using PowerPoint. Here, we are interested in how using some technology improves the presentation to make it more effective. We suggest the following key principles:

- 1 In most situations, the technology should be 'the servant' not 'the master'. You should control it rather than letting it dominate the presentation. If it creates problems, it will distract the presenters and the audience from the content that needs to be delivered.
- 2 It needs to be fit for purpose. Use it as an integral part of the presentation rather than an add-on feature.
- 3 The technology should improve what you have to communicate so that the audience gains a better understanding of your content. However, it may be that the topic will not be improved by the software that has to be used.
- 4 Rehearse using the technology, especially if it is an essential part of demonstrating your skills in the presentation. You will need to feel confident in how you use it.
- 5 Have a backup system in case it fails. We have seen situations where the technology failed but the presentation was still effective because the presenter had made copies of notes and screen shots that he then worked through with the audience. If you have rehearsed your presentation well, this type of experience will be less of a problem.

Clear supporting documentation

As part of your presentation, you may have been asked to create handouts but even if handouts are not essential, the audience may find summaries, lists of key points, or a

print out of the slides useful. Good handouts can be used in the future and may give a 'feel good factor' to the presentation. The style and level of detail given in this documentation should be relevant to the presentation situation and audience needs.

You will also need to think about how these documents will be used during the presentation. Will you give them out before the presentation so that the audience can use them to make their own notes, or will this approach distract their attention from the presenter or visuals on a screen? It is helpful at the start of the presentation to explain how you have decided to deal with the handouts and the level of note taking that will be needed by audience members. In some situations it may be more helpful and enjoyable to concentrate on the audio and visual content rather than trying to make notes for future recall. Supporting documentation is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

Suitable audience participation

Student presentations vary considerably as we discussed in Chapter 1. Some will be expected to involve the audience in activities or discussion at certain times within the presentation. Others will be more formal, having no interaction at all or requiring questions and answers only at the end of the presentation. Inevitably, the purpose of the presentation will influence the amount of audience participation but interesting participation can be a worthwhile experience for all concerned. Different perspectives on a topic can be identified and explored further. Creative ideas can stimulate discussion and extend understanding.

The briefing details for the presentation should explain the level of interaction expected and this will probably influence the design, level and structure of the content. In most situations, it is important for the presenter(s) to remain in control of the presentation and this includes managing the interactions with members of the audience. Make it clear at the start of the presentation how you expect them to participate by explaining how and when you want to take questions. There are several approaches to consider, for example, you could suggest that they can ask for further explanation if they do not understand a point you are covering but they must leave their general questions to the end of the presentation. This helps to set the ground rules and maintains a feeling of control for the presenters. It can sometimes be helpful to say how many minutes have been allocated for questions at the end of the presentation. If a member of the audience repeatedly tries to interrupt the flow, you can then remind them that there will be time for their questions at the end. Use this as a warning however. One or two students monopolizing this final stage of the presentation may irritate other members of the audience and cause them to withdraw from any further discussion.

If you want the audience to participate during the presentation, there are several techniques you can use to encourage this. You can do this by inviting questions

or directly involving chosen members of the audience with tasks, exercises and demonstrations.

If the audience is very quiet and do not immediately pose questions when you ask for any, it can be useful to prepare a few of your own questions that you use to extend the topic and perhaps stimulate further questions. Some audience members may be more willing to answer an open or a direct question from you rather than raise their own question.

Finally, questions can seem tedious after the third or fourth so select them carefully and link the ones that are similar to avoid any repetition and retain the audience's interest. Answer questions succinctly then move on. If someone keeps going back to the same point, close the discussion and offer to discuss it with them when the presentation is over. We discuss understanding your audience in Chapter 6.

We began this chapter by reminding you of the usefulness of presentations in learning situations and acknowledging the diversity in how they are used. For presentations to be effective, they need to fulfil their aims and objectives, be enjoyable and offer developmental opportunities for the presenters and the audiences.

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR DELIVERING EFFECTIVE PRESENTATIONS

- 1 Plan and prepare well. Preparing a presentation usually takes longer than you think it will. Good time management is essential.
- 2 Develop relevant and interesting content. Make sure it is useful for the audience and is suitable for the purpose of the presentation.
- 3 Create a clear and logical structure that will be easy for the audience to understand and will help you to feel in control.
- 4 Communicate clearly using a variety of skills and techniques.
- 5 Use the technologies suitable for the purpose. They should enhance the delivery rather than control or restrict it.
- 6 Create clear supporting documentation that will be useful for the presenter and the audience during and after the presentation.
- 7 Think about how much audience participation you need and include this in your content and structure.
- 8 Finally, make sure that you understand the purpose of the presentation and how it will be assessed by the tutor and measured for quality and effectiveness by the audience.

The following chapters discuss all of these features in more detail.