

Presentations skills

Presentations for business, sales, and training - oral and multimedia

Presentations skills and public speaking skills are very useful in many aspects of work and life. Effective presentations and public speaking skills are important in business, sales and selling, training, teaching, lecturing and generally entertaining an audience. Developing the confidence and capability to give good presentations, and to stand up in front of an audience and speak well, are also extremely helpful competencies for self-development too. Presentations and public speaking skills are not limited to certain special people - anyone can give a good presentation, or perform public speaking to a professional and impressive standard. Like most things, it simply takes a little preparation and practice.

The formats and purposes of presentations can be very different, for example: oral (spoken), multimedia (using various media - visuals, audio, etc), powerpoint presentations, short impromptu presentations, long planned presentations, educational or training sessions, lectures, and simply giving a talk on a subject to a group on a voluntary basis for pleasure. Even speeches at weddings and eulogies at funerals are types of presentations. They are certainly a type of public speaking, and are no less stressful to some people for being out of a work situation.

Yet every successful presentation uses broadly the essential techniques and structures explained here.

Aside from presentations techniques, confidence, experience - and **preparation** - are big factors.

You are not alone if the thought of speaking in public scares you. Giving a presentation is worrying for many people. Presenting or speaking to an audience regularly tops the list in surveys of people's top fears - more than heights, flying or dying.

Put another way, to quote the popularly used saying (which features in many presentations about giving presentations and public speaking), "Most people would prefer to be lying in the casket rather than giving the eulogy." (I first heard a speaker called Michelle Ray use this in the early 1990s. It is often credited to Jerry Seinfeld. If you know who originated the expression please [contact me](#).)

A common physical reaction to having to speak in public is a release of adrenaline and cortisol into our system, which I have heard likened to drinking several cups of coffee. Even experienced speakers feel their heart thumping very excitedly indeed. This sensational reaction to speaking in public is certainly not only felt by novices, and even some of the great professional actors and entertainers suffer with real physical sickness before taking the stage or podium.

You are not alone. Speaking in public is genuinely scary for most people, including many whom outwardly seem very calm.

Our primitive brain shuts down normal functions as the 'fight or flight' impulse takes over. (See FEAR under the [acronyms](#) section - warning - there is some adult content among the acronyms for training and presentations.)

But don't worry - your audience wants you to succeed. They're on your side. They're glad it's you up there and not them.

All you need to do is follow the guidelines contained on this page, and everything will be fine. Don't try to get rid of the butterflies - just get them flying in formation, (which is another wonderful expression I first heard from Michelle Ray - again I suspect she didn't originate it - please [tell me](#) if you know who did).

So, how do you settle the butterflies and get them flying in formation?

Good preparation is the key to **confidence**, which is the key to you **being relaxed**, and this settles the butterflies.

Good preparation and rehearsal will reduce your nerves by 75%, increase the likelihood of avoiding errors to 95%. (Source: Fred Pryor Organisation, a significant provider of seminars and open presentation events.)

And so this is the most important rule for effective presentations and public speaking:

Prepare, which means **plan it**, and **practise it**.

Then you'll be in control, and confident. Your audience will see this and respond accordingly, which in turn will help build your confidence, and dare we imagine, you might even start to enjoy yourself too.

Tips for effective presentations

I was sent this excellent and simple idea for a presentation - actually used in a job interview - which will perhaps prompt similar ideas and adaptations for your own situations.

At the start of the presentation the letters T, E, A, and M - fridge magnets - were given to members of the audience.

At the end of the presentation the speaker made the point that individually the letters meant little, but together they made a team.

This powerful use of simple props created a wonderful connection between start and finish, and supported a concept in a memorable and impactful way. (Thanks P Hodgson, Jun 2008)

Preparation and knowledge are the pre-requisites for a successful presentation, but confidence and control are just as important.

Remember and apply Eleanor Roosevelt's maxim that "no-one can intimidate me without my permission".

Remember also that "Depth of conviction counts more than height of logic, and enthusiasm is worth more than knowledge", (which in my notes from a while back was attributed to David Peebles, and I'm sorry not to be able to provide any more details than that).

Good presenting is about **entertaining** as well as conveying information. As well, people retain more if they are enjoying themselves and feeling relaxed. So whatever your subject and audience, try to find ways to make the content and delivery enjoyable - even the most serious of occasions, and the driest of subjects, can be lifted to an enjoyable or even an amusing level one way or another with a little research, imagination, and humour.

Enjoyment and humour are mostly in the preparation. You don't need to be a natural stand-up comedian to inject enjoyment and humour into a presentation or talk. It's the content that enables it, which is very definitely within your control.

You have 4 - 7 seconds in which to make a positive impact and good opening impression, so make sure you have a good, strong, solid introduction, and rehearse it to death.

Try to build your own credibility in your introduction, and create a safe comfortable environment for your audience, **which you will do quite naturally if you appear to be comfortable yourself.**

Smiling helps.

So does taking a few deep breaths - low down from the pit of your stomach - before you take to the stage.

Don't start with a joke unless you are supremely confident - jokes are high risk things at the best of times, let alone at the start of a presentation.

N.B. There is a big difference between telling a joke and injecting enjoyment and humour into your talk. Jokes are risky. Enjoyment and humour are safe. A joke requires quite a special skill in its delivery. Joke-telling is something of an art form. Only a few people can do it without specific training. A joke creates pressure on the audience to laugh at a critical moment. A joke creates tension - that's why it's funny (when it works). A joke also has the potential to offend, and jokes are culturally very sensitive - different people like different jokes. Even experienced comedians can 'die' on stage if their jokes and delivery are at odds with the audience type or mood. On the other hand, enjoyment and humour are much more general, they are not dependent on creating a tension or the expectation of a punchline. Enjoyment and humour can be injected in very many different ways - for example a few funny quotes or examples; a bit of audience participation; an amusing prop; an amusing picture or cartoon; an amusing story (not a joke). Another way to realise the difference between jokes and enjoyment is consider that you are merely seeking to make people smile and be mildly amused - not to have them belly laughing in the aisles. Enough about jokes..

To continue:

Don't start with an apology unless you've really made a serious error, or it's part of your plans and an intentional humorous device.

The audience will forgive you far more than you will forgive yourself.

Your apologising will make people feel uncomfortable.

If you do have to apologise for something don't make a meal of it and try to make light of it (unless it's really serious of course).

Try to start on time even if some of the audience is late. Waiting too long undermines your confidence, and the audience's respect for you.

The average attention span of an average listener is apparently (according to various sources I've seen over the years) between five and ten minutes for any single unbroken subject.

The playstation and texter generations will have less tolerance than this, so plan your content accordingly.

Break up the content so that no single item takes longer than a few minutes, and between each item try to inject something amusing, amazing, remarkable or spicy - a picture, a quote, a bit of audience interaction - anything to break it up and keep people attentive.

Staying too long on the same subject in the same mode of delivery will send people into the MEGO state (My Eyes Glaze Over).

So break it up, and inject diversions and variety - in terms of content and media.

Using a variety of media and movement will maintain maximum interest.

Think of it like this - the audience can be stimulated via several senses - not just audio and visual (listening and watching) - consider including content and activity which addresses the other senses too - touch certainly - taste maybe, smell maybe - anything's possible if you use your imagination. The more senses you can stimulate the more your audience will remain attentive and engaged.

You can stimulate other things in your audience besides the usual 'senses'.

You can use content and activities to stimulate feelings, emotions, memories, and even physical movement.

Simply asking the audience to stand up, or snap their fingers, or blink their eyes (assuming you give them a good reason for doing so) immediately stimulates physical awareness and involvement.

Passing several props or samples around is also a great way to stimulate physical activity and involvement.

Quotes are a wonderful and easy way to stimulate emotions and feelings, and of course quotes can be used to illustrate and emphasise just about any point or concept you can imagine.

Research and collect good quotations and include them in your notes. Memorise one or two if you can because this makes the delivery seem more powerful.

See the [funny quotations](#) and [inspirational quotes](#) webpages for ideas and examples.

Always credit the source of quotes you use.

Interestingly, Bobby Kennedy once famously failed to credit George Bernard Shaw when he said that "Some men see things as they are and ask 'why?'; I dare to dream of things that never were and ask 'why not?'"

Failing to attribute a quote undermines a speaker's integrity and professionalism. Conversely, giving credit to someone else is rightly seen as a positive and dignified behaviour.

Having quotes and other devices is important to give your presentation depth and texture, as well as keeping your audience interested.

"If the only tool in your toolbox is a hammer you'll treat everything as a nail." (Abraham Maslow)

So don't just speak at people. Give them a variety of content, and different methods of delivery - and activities too if possible.

Be daring and bold and have fun. Use props and pass them around if you can. The more senses you can stimulate the more fun your audience will have and the more they'll remember.

Some trainers of public speaking warn that passing props around can cause a loss of control or chaos. This is true, and I argue that it's good. It's far better to keep people active and engaged, even if it all needs a little additional control. Better to have an audience slightly chaotic than bored to death.

Planned chaos is actually a wonderful way to keep people involved and enjoying themselves. Clap your hands a couple of times and say calmly "Okay now - let's crack on," or something similarly confident and un-phased, and you will be back in control, with the audience refreshed for another 5-10 minutes.

Create analogies and themes, and use props to illustrate and reinforce them.

For example a bag of fresh lemons works well: they look great, they smell great, they feel great, and they're cheap, so you can give out loads and not ask for them back - all you have to do is think of an excuse to use them!

Here are examples of fun, humour, interest, participation and diversion that you can use to bring your presentation to life, and keep your audience attentive and enjoying themselves:

- [Stories](#)
- Questions and hands-up feedback
- Pictures, cartoons and video-clips
- [Diagrams](#)
- Sound-clips
- Straw polls (a series of hands-up votes/reactions which you record and then announce results)
- Inviting a volunteer to take the stage with you (for a carefully planned reason)
- Audience participation exercises
- Asking the audience to do something physical (clapping, deep breathing, blinking, finger-snapping, shouting, and other more inventive ideas)
- Asking the audience to engage with each other (for example introductions to person in next chair)
- [Funny quotations](#) (be careful not to offend anyone)
- [Inspirational quotations](#)
- [Acronyms](#)
- Props (see the [visual aids ideas page](#))
- Examples and case-study references
- Analogies and [fables](#)
- Prizes, awards and recognising people/achievements
- Book recommendations
- Fascinating facts (research is easy these days about virtually any subject)
- Statistics (which dramatically improve audience 'buy-in' if you're trying to persuade)
- [Games and exercises](#) (beware of things which take too much time - adapt ideas to be very very quick and easy to manage)
- Quirky ideas - (use your imagination - have everyone demonstrate their ringtones at the same time, or see who has the fastest/slowest watch time, or the most pens in their pocket/bag - depending on the occasion linked or not to the subject)
- and your body language, and the changing tone and pitch of your voice.

For longer presentations, if you're not an experienced speaker, aim to have a break every 45-60 minutes for people to get up and stretch their legs, otherwise you'll be losing them regardless of the amount of variety and diversion you include.

Take the pressure off yourself by not speaking all the time. Get the audience doing things, and make use of all the communications senses available.

Interestingly the use of visual aids generally heightens retention of the spoken word - it is said by some up to 70%.

Tony Buzan's figures on the subject of information retention are:

Read 10% - Heard 20% - Seen 30% - Heard and Seen 50% - Said 70% - Said and Done 90%.

Visual aids tips

For printed visual aids with several paragraphs of text, use serif fonts (a font is a typeface) for quicker readability. For computer and LCD projectors use sans serif fonts, especially if the point size (letter size) is too small.

Arial is a sans serif font. Times is a serif font. (A serif font has the extra little cross-lines which finish off the strokes of the letters. Interestingly, serif fonts originated in the days of engraving, before printing, when the engraver needed an exit point from each letter.

Extensive sections of text can be read more quickly in serif font because the words have a horizontal flow, but serif fonts have a more old-fashioned traditional appearance than sans serif. If you need to comply with a company type-style you'll maybe have no choice anyway. Whatever - try to select fonts and point sizes that are fit for the medium and purpose.

Use no more than two different fonts and no more than two size/bold/italic variants or the whole thing becomes confused. If in doubt simply pick a good readable serif font and use it big and bold for headings, and 14 - 16 point size for the body text.

Absolutely avoid upper case (capital letters) in body text, because people need to be able to read word-shapes as well as the letters, and of course upper case makes every word a rectangle, so it takes ages to read. Upper case is just about okay for headings if you really have to.

See ['tricks of the trade'](#) in the marketing and advertising section for lots of tips and secrets about presenting the written word.

Create your own prompts and notes - whatever suits you best. Cue cards are fine but make sure to number them and tie them together in order. A single sheet at-a-glance timetable is a great safety-net for anything longer than half an hour. You can use this to monitor your timing and pace.

Preparation - creating your presentation

Think about your audience, your aims, their expectations, the surroundings, the facilities available, and what type of presentation you are going to give (lecture style, informative, participative, etc).

What are your aims? To inform, inspire and entertain, maybe to demonstrate and prove, and maybe to persuade.

How do you want the audience to react?

Thinking about these things will help you ensure that your presentation is going to achieve its purpose.

Clearly identify your subject and your purpose to yourself, and then let the creative process take over for a while to gather all the possible ideas for subject matter and how you could present it. Use brainstorming and mind-mapping.

Both processes involve freely putting random ideas and connections down on a piece of paper - the bigger the better - using different coloured big felt pens will help too. Don't write lists and don't try to write the presentation until you have picked the content and created a rough structure from your random collected ideas and material. See the section on [brainstorming](#).

When you have all your ideas on paper, organise them into subject matter categories, three is best. Does it flow? Is there a logical sequence that people will follow and you'll be comfortable with?

Use the rule of three to structure the presentation; it has a natural balance and flow. A simple approach is to have three main sections. Each section has three sub-sections. Each of these can have three sub-sections, and so on. A 30 minute presentation is unlikely to need more than three sections, with three sub-sections each. A three day training course presentation need have no more than four levels of three, giving 81 sub-sections in all. Simple!

Presentations almost always take longer to deliver than you think the material will last.

You must create a strong introduction and a strong close.

You must tell people what you're going to speak about and what your purpose is.

And while you might end on a stirring quotation or a stunning statistic, you must before this have summarised what you have spoken about and if appropriate, demanded an action from your audience, even if it is to go away and think about what you have said.

Essentially the structure of all good presentations is to:

"Tell'em what you're gonna tell'em. Tell'em. Then tell'em what you told'em." (George Bernard Shaw - thanks Neville Toptani)

When you have structured your presentation, it will have an opening, a middle with headed sections of subject matter, and a close, with opportunity for questions if relevant. This is still a flat '2D' script.

Practice it in its rough form.

Next you give it a 3rd Dimension by blending in your presentation method. This entails the equipment and materials you use, case studies, examples, quotations, analogies, questions and answers, individual and syndicate exercises, interesting statistics, and any kind of presentation aid you think will work.

Practice it in rough 3D form. Get a feel for the timing. Amend and refine it. This practice is essential to build your competence and confidence, and also to practice the pace and timing. You'll be amazed at how much longer the presentation takes than you think it will.

Ask an honest and tactful friend to listen and watch you practice. Ask for their comments about how you can improve, especially your body position and movement, your pace and voice, and whether they understood everything. If they can't make at least a half a dozen constructive suggestions ask someone else.

Produce the presentation materials and organise the equipment, and ensure you are comfortable with your method of cribbing from notes, cards etc.

Practice it in its refined 3D form. Amend and refine if necessary, and if possible have a final run-through in the real setting if it's strange to you.

Take nothing for granted. Check and double-check, and plan contingencies for anything that might go wrong.

Plan and control the layout of the room as much as you are able. If you are a speaker at someone else's event you'll not have much of a say in this, but if it's your event then take care to position yourself, your equipment and your audience and the seating plan so that it suits you and the situation. For instance, don't lay out a room theatre-style if you want people to participate in teams. Use a boardroom layout if you want a cooperative debating approach.

Make sure everyone can see the visuals displays.

Make sure you understand and if appropriate control and convey the domestic arrangements (fire drill, catering, smoking, messages, breaks etc.)

Delivering your presentation

Relax, have a rock-solid practiced opening, and smile. Be firm, be confident and be in control; the floor is yours, and the audience is on your side.

Introduce yourself and tell them what you're going to tell them. Tell them why you're telling them it; why it's important, and why it's you that's telling them. Tell them how long you're going to take, and tell them when they can ask questions (if you're nervous about being thrown off-track then it's okay to ask them save their questions until the end).

By the time you've done this introduction you've established your authority, created respect and credibility, and overcome the worst of your nerves. You might even be enjoying it; it happens. If you're just giving a short presentation then by the time you've done all this you've completed a quarter of it!

Remember, if you are truly scared, a good way to overcome your fear is just to do it.

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." (Friedrich Nietzsche)

Remember also, initial impact is made and audience mood towards you is established in the first 4-7 seconds.

Be aware of your own body language and remember what advice you got from your friend on your practice run. You are the most powerful visual aid of all, so use your body movement and position well. Don't stand in front of the screen when the projector is on.

If people talk amongst themselves just stop and look at them. Say nothing, just look. You will be amazed at the effect, and how quickly your authority increases. This silent tactic usually works with a chaotic audience too.

If you want a respite or some thinking time, asking the audience a question or involving them in an exercise takes the pressure off you, and gives you a bit of breathing space.

Pausing is fine. It always seems like an age when you're up there, but the audience won't notice unless you start umming-and-aahing. Knowing that a pause now and then is perfectly fine will help you to concentrate on what you're saying next, rather than the pause.

Keep control, no-one will to question your authority when you have the floor, so don't give it up.

If you don't know the answer to a question say so and deal with it later. You have the right to defer questions until the end (on the grounds that you may well be covering it in the presentation later anyway, or just simply because you say so).

Close positively and firmly, and accept plaudits graciously.

Creating and giving presentations - step by step summary

1. define purpose
2. gather content and presentation ideas
3. structure the subject matter
4. develop how to present it
5. prepare presentation
6. practice
7. plan, experience, control the environment
8. 'dress rehearsal' if warranted

Prepare the presentation

Points to remember: why are you presenting? What's the purpose? To whom? How? when and where?, audience, venue, aims, equipment, media, subject, outcome aim, audience reaction aim, type of presentation, brainstorm, mind-map, random subject-matter collection, be innovative and daring, what's the WIIFM for your audience (the 'what's in it for me' factor - see acronyms), materials, media, exercises, gather spice, case-studies, statistics, props, quotations, analogies, participation, syndicates, anticipate questions, know your knowledge-base and reference points, decide your prompt system - cue cards, notes, whatever suits you best.

Create and design the presentation

Points to remember: plan the structure, tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them what you told them, rule of three, intro, close and middle, create your headings and sub-headings, assemble and slot in your subject-matter, spice and activities, plan early impact and to create a credible impression, consider attention spans and audience profile to get the language and tone right, add spice every 5-10 minutes, build the presentation, prepare equipment, prepare materials and props, create your prompts or notes, dry-run practice, timings, create fall-back contingencies, practice, get feed-back, refine, practice and practice.

Deliver the presentation

Relax, you have practiced and prepared so nothing will go wrong, enjoy it, the audience is on your side.

Points to remember: smile, solid well-rehearsed opening, impact, tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them what you told them, entertainment, interest, body-language, humour, control, firmness, confidence, avoid jokes/sexism/racism, speak your audience's language, accentuate the positive, use prompts, participation, and have fun!

Here are some materials you might find useful for injecting humour, enjoyment, amazement, interest and activities into your presentations:

amusing and fascinating [origins of words, expressions and cliches](#)

[visual aids ideas](#)

[money slang and money history \(UK\)](#)

[cockney rhyming slang](#)

word-play [puzzles and games](#) for quizzes and exercises

[acronyms](#) for speaking and presenting and training

[funny quotes allegedly from letters to Islington Council's Housing Department](#)

[real funny insurance claims](#)

[real funny Weakest Link answers](#)

[real funny Family Fortunes Answers](#)

[aesop's fables](#)

[teambuilding exercises](#)

[amusing and inspirational stories and analogies](#) for training, public-speaking and writing

[stress management](#)

[cosmology](#)

[tools, tests and diagrams](#)

There are many more training and development ideas and materials on the [main businessballs website](#) if you are not already there.

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