

Presentation Skills: Presenting Reports and Essays

From time to time you will probably have to give a talk or read a paper in one of your classes. Remember that even experienced speakers get nervous; you can make your nervous energy work for you rather than against you with thorough preparation and a strong effort to communicate effectively.

Preparation

- In some cases you may be simply asked to read in class an essay or paper you have written before handing it in. In this case, all you need to concern yourself with is the way you read it.
- At other times, you may be asked to give a talk, the text of which will not be handed in, or to give a talk and then submit a written version of the talk. Sometimes, you may be asked to prepare and submit a recorded version of your talk. In these cases, consider the following points about your preparation.

Topic

- Deciding on the specific topic for your talk may be a gradual process in which you gather ideas by thinking and reading about the topic first.
- Be careful, however, that you do not choose too large a topic. A narrow focus produces a stronger presentation.
- It is surprising how little you can cover adequately in, say, 15 minutes.

Basic Parts of the Talk

The most effective talks are usually made from detailed notes rather than a complete word-for-word text. However, if you feel unable to speak from detailed notes, you should feel free to write it all out.

Introduction

- As in an essay, this tells why your topic is important and give context for your topic (i.e., how it relates to other aspects of the subject or the course generally) and explains what you intend to talk about.
- Outline the various parts of the topic you have chosen to cover. Try to engage the interest of your listeners.

Body

- This will be the largest section. Here you develop the topic and go into all the necessary supporting detail.

Conclusion

- A summary of the main points made in the body is useful here.
- You might suggest broader implications of the topic you haven't touched on, and indicate that they would provide interesting subjects for the class to discuss.
- You can mention specific aspects of the subject on which you would be interested in hearing the opinions of others or which still puzzle you.
- You can suggest specific areas which you may not have explained clearly enough and invite questions on them.

Helping Your Listeners

An important difference between written and spoken communication is that when speaking you need to help the listener along more emphatically in several ways:

Restatement

- Repeat things in different words. This gives your audience more time to grasp the point.

Listing

- If you have several sections that are parallel or which go together, number them. Tell your audience: "The first cause of this is...", "The second cause is ..."

Summaries

- Every so often, explain how far you have come in the argument or explanation by summarizing what has been covered so far.

Connective transitions

- These enable your audience to move mentally with you from one point to the next.
- Tell them where you are going and how this next section relates to the one before (and to the subject as a whole). For instance, "Now that we understand the problem that the engineer faced, let's see how it was solved." Or, "Since we know the history of this movement, let's attempt to identify its causes."

Examples

- Make sparing use of quantitative information, such as statistics or numerical data, since it is harder to take in by the ear than by the eye. A very few interesting facts and examples are better than a whole mass of data. Try to use examples that your audience can easily visualize.
- If you need to present material which is hard to convey in words alone, use visual aids. In most classroom situations, this means using slides (e.g. PowerPoint) or a whiteboard. Make sure you know in advance exactly what you are going to display. Another solution is to prepare handouts of the information.

Practice

- Practice your talk exactly as you are going to give it, and go through it as many times as you need in order to feel comfortable with it. Pay careful attention to timing. Adjust your material until you have a talk of the right length.