

The logo of the University of Sussex, featuring the letters 'US' in a large, dark blue, serif font.

UNIVERSITY
OF SUSSEX

History Department

How to give a presentation

Initial Preparation

Why am I doing this?

Decide on the objective of the presentation. There will be a general objective as well as specific objectives relating to the subject matter. It is a good idea to write down the objective(s) in one sentence. This focuses the effort, ensures that material selected fits the objective(s) and allows for checking once the notes are written.

Who is this for?

Think about the audience:

1. How large is it?
2. What is their present knowledge of the subject?
3. Are they likely to be biased (for/against)?
4. What are their expectations?

All the above points will help to determine material and approach. It is your task to make sure that the presentations is pitched at the right level for the audience.

Preparing the Material

Any talk will fail unless careful thought is given to the subject matter; unstructured, rambling talks are difficult to concentrate on. The main points should be made very clear to the audience, or the message will be forgotten quickly. It is essential to get all your thoughts and ideas down on paper. It is necessary to plan the sequence of your presentation.

Structuring and Selecting

You will invariably have too many ideas and too much information for the length of your presentation. It is important to keep the number of main points to a minimum. In a 15-minute talk you shouldn't try to make more than four main points. You should concentrate on, and write notes for, the middle for the presentation first; opening and closing comes later.

The selection of material should be governed by the following

- The objective – is some of your material irrelevant to the objective(s)?
- The audience – what do they know already?
- How long- what is the time constraint?

MUST, SHOULD, COULD, sorting points into this order helps to avoid the temptation to include everything you know.

The simplest structure is based on the following:

- Tell people what you are going to tell them
- Tell them
- Tell them what you've told them

(This is the technique used by most news bulletins)

The following structure may be useful when presenting a case or trying to persuade people to your view.

- State the proposition
- Anticipate objections-even if you don't express these to the audience it is important to consider them
- Prove your case- select the best reasons, don't overload

- Show evidence, use practical examples, don't slant evidence
- End by repeating the proposition.

It makes for easier listening if you alert your audience to the structure by linking carefully e.g.- "so let's look at the second area I/we want to cover..." Try to illustrate difficult ideas with simple images and examples.

Working in Groups

If you are delivering a group presentation, think carefully about how you will work together. Do you all need to speak? If not, how will you acknowledge everyone's contribution to the group? If more than one of you is speaking, how will you manage the handovers? You may consider using one of the group to do just the opening and closing sections, while introducing other members of the group for their specific contribution.

Opening and Closing

Only when you have sorted the main part of the presentation should you think about the beginning and end since the content of the middle will dictate these.

The introduction should do the following:

1. Capture attention (avoid clichés, weak jokes and self-effacing comments)
2. Show the audience why they need to listen
3. Tell them what you're going to say and what your objective is

The closing section should be just that. Don't finish weakly with some trite phrase like "I think that's all I've got to say...". Summarise your main points, stop.

Notes

Try to use brief notes consisting of key words, possibly written on prompt cards. You must avoid simply reading out a pre-written text, as this is very unengaging for the audience. Think about the better lectures you may have attended, and use the same delivery techniques.

Putting the message over

- Only use jargon when absolutely necessary
- Use concrete, simple language if possible
- Try to talk in sentences, avoid stringing things together with a number of ands and buts
- Try to sound enthusiastic
- Pause, don't be afraid to stop occasionally
- Vary tone, pitch and pace
- Speak clearly
- Speak up

Body language is important

- Look at the audience
- Smile sometimes
- Try not to be too rigid, but beware of distracting mannerisms

Dealing with Nerves

The following suggestions may help:

- Prepare thoroughly.
- Beware the self-fulfilling prophecy: other students aren't hostile, but if you expect them to be, they might become hostile.
- Distract yourself before the start.
- Try neck exercises and deep breaths.
- Prepare questions.
- Worry about the subject not yourself.

The audience is composed of reasonable people and you know what you want to tell them.