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Essential Study Skills

The Complete Guide to
Success at University

Tom Burns & Sandra Sinfield

4th Edition

companion
website



12.3 How to Deliver Excellent Presentations

Okay – we're all terrified of public speaking! This chapter is designed to crack the code of the academic presentation. This chapter is supported by a Presentations Pack downloadable from the Sage website (<https://study.sagepub.com/burnsandsinfield4e/>).

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Introduction

'I really hated the thought of presentations, but once they were over I felt so good about myself. In the end I wanted more of them.'

Presentations are meant to exploit the fact that most of us are much better at speaking than we are at writing. Of course, what this glosses over is that students, like every other normal human being on the planet, tend to be terrified of public speaking, of presentations. In this chapter we are going to explore the what, why and how of presentations. We cannot make all the fear go away, but we can help you to realise that you can get really good at presentations – you might even get to enjoy them.

What is a presentation?

There are several 'whats' to a presentation that we are going to cover here – they are all true. The trick for you, as always, is to think, 'How will knowing this help me to give better presentations?'

It's a talk

'I remember this presentation, it was on breast cancer, a really frightening topic, and the students had left all the funny noises on their PowerPoint. So there they were giving life and death statistics and scaring everyone silly, and all the while there are explosions, whistles, flying noises and breaking glass!'

A presentation is a formal talk of a set length on a set topic given to a set audience. When preparing your presentation you have to think about all these factors: time, topic, audience. That is, you have to fit the topic into the time you have been given – and no longer. Check with the tutor if there are penalties for going over time.

You also have to pitch the topic at your actual audience. Again, as with the report, think about real people with real knowledge, thoughts and feelings. You have to make sure that your language, style and tone are just right for the real people that you are going to address. Finally, you have to make sure that any audiovisual aids (AVA) – your supporting material, handouts, PowerPoint, websites, photographs, posters – are appropriate and will connect with your actual audience. There are two main purposes of using AVAs:

- to help the audience follow and make sense of your presentation, e.g. an outline of the whole presentation, a poster or pattern note of the whole presentation
- to illustrate, emphasise or underline key points, e.g. a quote, a picture, an example, a physical object.

Tip

Use posters to support your presentation – even if not asked to – they help your audience follow and understand your talk. Prepare a creative visual collage – or go for the more formal academic poster: www.fobit.biz/?p=1605.

It's an act

No matter what anyone else tells you, remember that a presentation is a *performance*. You are standing in front of people and talking to them: they are looking at and listening to you – this is a performance. Therefore you are a performer. Use this knowledge – and *act*. To make presentations work for you, act happy, confident and interested – even if you are bored silly or scared witless. If you are happy, your audience can be happy, if you are not, they cannot. If you are bored – your audience will be too ... So act your socks off.

Tips

Positive body language

- Do face the audience.
- Do not only look at the wall or whiteboard behind you.
- Do stand or sit straight.
- Do not hold anything in front of your face.
- Do smile.
- Do not tap your foot or make chopping motions with your hands.
- Do draw people calmly into your presentation with brief welcoming gestures.
- Do not hold your arms defensively in front of your body.
- Do stand in a relaxed manner.

- Do not stand there with clenched fists or looking as if you want to be somewhere else.
- Do dress for success.
- (In a group presentation) do not act as if you hate everybody else on the team.
- Do *act* calm, confident and in control.

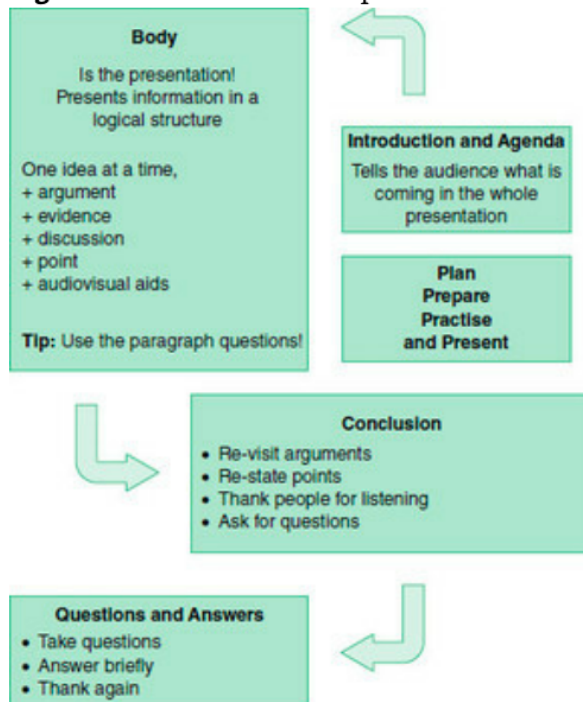
It's interactive

As a performer, you will have to build a rapport with your audience and create a relationship with them: you *interact* with them. This means that you will need to *look at them*. You will have to make eye contact with your audience.

So ignore those who advise you to look at the ceiling at the back of the room. That may be okay if you have an audience of 1,000 or more people, but in a small group it looks weird, and not in a good way. You will need to look at people to draw them into your talk and take them with you. You will need to check that they are following and understanding what you say – to check if you need to repeat or explain something. You will never discover this if you do not look at your audience.

Finally, for it to be a successful interactive performance, just like an actor on the stage, *you must never, ever speak from a script*. You must not read a presentation. You must learn your presentation and then deliver it fresh, as though for the first time. Reading a presentation is the quickest way to lose your audience and lose marks.

Figure 12.3.1 Structure of a presentation



It's a formal convention

The presentation has the same shape as the essay – and it has the same need to address real audiences as the report. Therefore, you should have a sense of the pre-

sentation already from what you now know about essays and reports.

A beginner's guide to presentations

Introduction

The introduction should include a clear agenda:

- Introduce yourself.
- Give the topic title.
- Hook your audience.
- Give the agenda.

The introduction is where you acknowledge the question and help the audience understand how you are going to tackle it. Think hook and agenda: the *hook* tells them *why* they should be listening to you: are you going to be interesting, useful or funny? Will it help them pass an exam or get better grades? Will it save them time or effort? Think of something. The *agenda* is where you tell the audience exactly *what* is coming in your presentation. Without an agenda the audience does not know where the talk is going. This is unsettling – and confusing. A confused audience is not a happy audience. Tell them what is coming ... and this simple technique will dramatically improve the presentation itself – and your marks.

Presentation body

This is the presentation. This is where you answer the question that you were set, making a logical case. As with the five paragraph essay, think: three big ideas – introduction – conclusion. For each idea, think: argument – evidence – AVA.

Tips

Use the paragraph questions to structure *each section* of your presentation:

- What is this section about?
- What exactly is that?
- Tell me more?
- What is your evidence? What does it mean?
- How does this relate back to the question as a whole?

Conclusion

As with the essay conclusion, this is where you draw the whole presentation together. Re-visit your main arguments, re-emphasise your main points – and use all the words from the question to prove that you have answered the whole question.

Tips

- Write introductions and conclusions last.
- Accept this is a repetitive structure: tell them what is coming; tell them; tell them what you told them. This can feel silly, obvious or uncomfortable, especially in a short presentation. But this is what is required, so bite the bullet and do it!

The question and answer session

It's over – you want to rush out screaming! Don't. You now have to thank the audience for listening and ask them for questions.

Tips

- Do re-phrase difficult questions – check that you have understood.
- Do keep answers short.
- Do keep answers good-natured.
- Do notice when people put their hands up – take questions in order.
- Do not fight with your audience.
- Do not try to make everyone agree with you.
- Do not think that you have to know everything (unless it is a job interview or an oral exam).
- If you cannot answer why not try: 'That is a very good question – what does everyone else think?' If no one else knows, 'Well, that has given us all something to think about. Thank you again for listening!'
- Do bring the question and answer session to a firm end. The audience likes to know when it is all over safely.

Why do we set presentations?

As with planning and preparing any assignment, the process of preparing a presentation is designed to be an active learning process. As you plan, prepare, practise and perform your presentation you are really getting to grips with and learning the material. As you think about how to *communicate* a topic effectively to your audience you are synthesising and using information.

It's an opportunity

'I did everything you said and practised again and again. The tutor said I was a natural – if only she knew.'

And, yes, presentations really are an opportunity to shine. Before you have successfully delivered and survived your first presentation you may find this hard to believe, but once you have done this, you may find that given the choice between

an essay and a presentation, you would choose the presentation every time. Once you have cracked how to do presentations well, you will realise that it is easier to get good grades for a presentation than for a piece of writing.

It's a job skill

Further, good oral communication skills are definitely required by employers – some even require a formal presentation as part of the interview. Developing good presentation skills whilst at university can make the difference between getting that job you want – or not.

Tip

Make notes on what you did well in all your presentations and put these in your CV folder (see [Chapter 13.1](#)).

It's self-confidence

Finally, once you can do presentations, your self-esteem really improves. From the very first one that you plan, prepare, practise and present, you start to feel better about yourself as a student and this enhances all your studies. This is not just something that we are telling you here to make you feel better – this is something that all our students have told us: succeeding in presentations is the best confidence booster they have ever had.

Tip

Think positive thoughts to drown out your negative ones: *I can do this; This is a great presentation*. Check out [Chapter 3](#).

How to succeed in presentations: the four Ps

Here we will be looking at the four presentation Ps: plan, prepare, practise and present.

Plan

Think about your time limit, your topic and your audience:

- *Time limit*: how can you fit the topic in the time you have been allowed? What will you have to put in – what will you have to leave out?
- *Topic and audience*: remember – an audience is made up of real people with real knowledge and expectations of their own. They will not want to be patronised – they will want to learn something.

Tip

Be interesting!

Planning Tips

'I knew a postgraduate student who went all the way to Japan to deliver a presentation based on a video. The technologies were incompatible, they couldn't show the video. The whole thing was a huge and expensive disaster!'

When you start planning your presentation, consider the following:

- What can I expect my audience to know about this topic before I start?
- What will I want them to know when I have finished (= the aim of your presentation)?
- How will I get them from where they are to where I want them to be (= a logical structure to your presentation)?
- What language, tone and style will be right for this audience?
- What arguments and evidence will they understand – and relate to?
- What audiovisual aids will help – and will work with this audience?
 - think of visual aids to *illustrate the topic* – photographs, charts, diagrams, key quotes, posters
 - think of visual aids that will help people *follow your presentation* – have the agenda on a handout or write it on the board, make a large pattern note of your presentation, and display it, make a poster.
- How will my audience react to this topic? Will they be resistant, happy, frightened, interested? What will I have to do to get them to respond positively?
- What questions might they ask me? What answers will I give?

Action plan: now that you have considered all these things: what will you do, read, find and make to get your presentation ready?

Prepare

'I must stress the research and preparation!! When I've participated in presentations, either on my own or in groups, confidence came from how well we had worked together and how much research we had done.'

Preparing a presentation requires the same research and hard work that an essay does, and then you have to make audiovisual aids as well.

Some preparation guidelines

- *Remember the ten steps* ([Chapter 11.3](#)): brainstorm the topic, link to the learning outcomes ...
- *Read actively and interactively*: gather all the information you need to answer the question.

- *Plan the presentation*: give it the shape that will take your audience from where they are to where you want them to be.
- *Be interesting!* Never tell the audience everything from A to B to C. This is boring. Choose an interesting aspect of the topic – focus on, elaborate and illustrate that.
- *Remember to make your AVA*: with backups (e.g. handouts of PowerPoint slides).
- *Convince yourself first*: if you can act as though you believe it, it will help the audience to believe you.
- *Prepare a script*: once you have collected all your data and understood and shaped it, you may wish to prepare a script for the presentation. A script can give you a sense that you have taken control of your presentation and organised your material to your satisfaction. That is okay – if you remember that you must not read from your script. So at some point you *should destroy your script*.
- *Prepare your prompts*: make cue cards or prompt sheets to guide you through the presentation itself. This could include:
 - key words or pictures instead of words
 - key examples and quotes
 - key names and dates.
- *Number your cue cards and your points*.
- *You must destroy your script* – no really!

Tips

- You must not read from a script – you will be boring and dull and you will lose your audience.
- Re-create your presentation from the key words on your cue cards.
- It does not matter if you forget something – the audience won't know. Better to be lively and miss a bit – than say everything and be dull and boring.

Practise, practise, practise

'The success of the group presentation relied very heavily on how well we had got on before the day and the solo presentation relied very heavily on how much effort I had put into the preparation and research. There were very few students who could 'wing' it and often those that tried fell short when questions were put to them.'

Once you have a shape to your presentation, with your prompts prepared, you are now ready to review, revise, edit and learn your presentation – and this comes through practising or rehearsing your presentation. You must not say the presentation for the first time in front of an audience – the words will sound extremely strange to you. You will confuse and upset yourself. This is not a good thing. You must learn and be comfortable with your presentation.

There are several key stages to your rehearsal:

- *Tidy it:* your first rehearsal allows you to review, refine and finish your presentation – and turn it from a written thing to an oral thing. When speaking we have to get to the point – quickly.
- *Learn it:* rehearse your actual presentation – in front of a critical friend. Keep making it shorter – more direct – more effective. Walk around your home delivering the presentation to your cat or a chair. Make yourself feel comfortable speaking those words out loud.
- *Refresh it:* once you are comfortable with speaking out loud and you know your presentation by heart, then you need to practise until you can say it every time as though you are saying it for the first time. This will keep your presentation fresh and alive and it will appeal to and grip your audience.

Tip

Do not rehearse in front of your children. Our mature students always say that their children tend to say 'it's boring, it's silly'.

Perform: tips and tricks

'I think one of the pitfalls of doing the presentation is not approaching it in the same way as any other assessment ... and forgetting the extra element of practising beforehand.'

Okay – you are going to be nervous. Do not focus on that. Think positive thoughts and get on with it. Here are some positive things to do.

Before your presentation

- *Be positive:* read 'Believe in yourself' in [Chapter 3](#). Practise your positive thinking. Keep saying: 'I am prepared', 'This is a great presentation'.
- *Be mindful:* when travelling to your presentation, run through your main points with and without your cue cards. Reassure yourself that you do know it.
- *Be early:* get to the room early so you will be as cool, calm and collected as you can be. Rushing in late will increase your stress levels.
- *Be organised:* take control of the environment. Organise the seating. Where will you want people to sit so that you feel good and they can all hear you? Do you want them in rows, in a semi-circle, sitting on the floor?
- *Be in control:* check that the equipment is working.
- *Be alert:* use your adrenalin – it will help you think on your feet.
- *Be positive again:* say, 'I am prepared' and, 'I can handle this'.
- *Be physiological:* stress has a biofeedback effect where the things our bodies do when we are stressed actually increases our stress. We have to learn to de-stress our bodies. If too stressed before or during your presentation:
 - stop

- sigh
- drop your shoulders (we hold our shoulders up when tense and this increases tension)
- wriggle your toes (we clench our feet when stressed and this increases our blood pressure and hence our stress levels)
- unclench your fists – this is a typical anger/fear reaction – let it go
- take a few deep, slow breaths (deep quick ones and you will pass out)
- start again more slowly (stopping and refocusing never counts against you, it can even impress your tutor).
- *Be on the ball*: write your agenda on the board, on a handout, on an overhead transparency (OHT) or on the flip chart.

Tip

Arrange to stand behind a desk or a lectern. This small barrier between you and your audience will help you feel safe and in control.

Tip

Have a back-up system in place – have print-outs of your PowerPoint slides to circulate as handouts if the computer does not work.

During your presentation

- Introduce yourself and your topic.
- Give a brief introduction and say your agenda even if it is written up.
- Speak slowly and clearly. Let people hear and follow you.
- If you get lost – don't panic! Pause, look at your prompts, and carry on.
- Remember to use linguistic markers: 'We have looked at ...', 'Now we are going to cover ...', 'Moving on to ...'
- Make good eye contact – look at everyone in the room.
- Do stand so that you can see everyone and everyone can see you. Don't stare fixedly at one person so that they want to get up and leave.
- Use your AVA with confidence. Make sure everyone can see your AVA. Allow people to notice what is there – then take it away.
- Remember your conclusion – re-visit and re-state your main points ... no matter how silly it seems. Your audience does not know the topic as well as you do – they will need to be reminded of what you have talked about and what it means.
- Thank people for listening – ask for questions.
- Chair the Q&A session fairly – keep those answers short and sweet. Bring the Q&A to a firm conclusion. Thank people again.
- After your presentation, review your performance.

Tip

After your presentation – be a SWOT

As with the essay and the report, it is useful for you to be able to review and evaluate your own presentations. However, because of the especially emotional dimension of presentations, we recommend that you undertake this in two stages:

1. Immediately after your presentation, tell yourself what a wonderful presentation it was and how brave you were for giving it. Do not dwell on anything that went wrong; this just makes it harder to do a presentation next time. So make this first review a very positive one.
2. After some time has elapsed undertake a more detailed SWOT analysis of your presentation.
 - What were your strengths? What did you do very well? What sections of the presentation were you particularly pleased with? Why? Sometimes we are so busy correcting our faults that we forget to repeat our strengths. Make notes so that you remember.
 - What were your weaknesses? What did not go so well? Why was this? Was it *form* – perhaps it was not structured or presented properly? Was it *content* – was it a poor argument unsupported by evidence? Did you forget to discuss your evidence? Did you forget to refer back to the question? Make notes.
 - Opportunities: now, go on, try to think of just how good you can become at presentations and of all the opportunities this gives you, both as a student and in future employment. Make notes.
 - Threats: if you are still feeling threatened by presentations, what are you going to do next? Will you practise more? Do you need more support with your positive thinking? Do you need to find a study partner? Do you need to seek out Learning Development or Academic Support and get some more help? Make notes.

Tips

- Make notes of your strengths – repeat them.
- Make notes of your weaknesses – repair them.
- Use your tutor feedback.
- Use video play-back to refine your performance.

Get creative

‘One presentation that really impressed me was one on Fibonacci numbers in maths. The group used sunflowers and pineapples to illustrate the numbers in nature. One played the flute to illustrate the link between maths and music.

There were wonderful drawings illustrating numbers and rabbits (don't ask!) ... I thought it was excellent.'

The presentation can be more flexible than the essay. Whilst it is not usually a good idea to write a poem when you have been asked to write an essay, it can be a good idea to be creative with a presentation. If your tutor is the sort of person who will appreciate a little creativity, then play with how you will communicate with and involve your audience. We have seen tutors really impressed when students have performed a mini-play instead of giving a straight presentation. So when thinking about your presentation – do all the good planning and preparation discussed above – but also think whether a different sort of performance would actually get you a higher mark – and go for it.

Presentations: essential things to do

'I feel that you need to really emphasise group presentations, as they can differ greatly and rely heavily on the success or failure of the group. My group presentations worked because we got on – we worked together well – and we rehearsed together.'

- *The three-minute presentation*: before delivering an assessed presentation for your coursework, practise by preparing and delivering a three-minute presentation to a friend, study partner or study group. Choose a simple topic like a hobby or a holiday – but something that really interests and engages you. Use your energy and enthusiasm for the topic. With this presentation get the form right: introduction, agenda; body = logical structure + AVA; conclusion; Q&A. This will build your confidence for your assignment.
- *Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse*: for an assessed presentation, practise with a critical friend. Use their feedback.
- *Team work*: if asked to prepare and deliver a group presentation – plan together, get together, make the AVA together, rehearse together:
 - Have a *team leader* and a *note taker* – help people play to their strengths. Encourage everybody – hate no one!
 - Do *look like a group* – have badges, dress in similar colours.
 - Do *act* as though you were a good group that worked really well together – even if you all now dislike each other!
 - Do *listen to each other* when presenting – do not chat whilst someone is speaking – look fascinated.
 - Do *learn each other's sections* – be ready to carry on if someone disappears.
- *Role-play*: build some element of dramatic performance into your presentation, especially with a group. When students act out a scenario or role-play a point to illustrate it, tutors are usually really impressed and give higher marks.
- *Poster presentations*: even if not asked to prepare a poster for your presentation, make one anyway. Research indicates that audiences find it easier to follow, understand and enjoy a presentation that has been backed up by a well-de-

signed and beautifully illustrated poster.

Tip

Use the presentation checklist to evaluate yourself and ask your friend to complete one for you, too.

Summary

We have looked in some detail at the academic presentation, emphasising the opportunity for developing your communications skills, your self-confidence and your employability. As with all assignments, presentations are heuristic, they bring about active learning – and the presence of an audience is an excellent incentive to ensure that you communicate well what you have learned. Try to enjoy your presentations – and use the four Ps of the presentation: plan, prepare, practise and present – and the ‘fifth P’ – positive thinking.

Activity

Use the presentation checklist

Photocopy this checklist and use it to review your own presentations.

- ☐ My introduction: tells the audience what I am talking about and why.
- ☐ It has a ‘hook’ telling the audience why they should listen – it is ...
- ☐ I have a clear agenda telling people the ‘order’ of my talk.
- ☐ I will write my agenda – and speak it.
- ☐ I have a logical structure – it does answer the question set.
- ☐ I have thought about my audience – in terms of language, tone, style and interesting AVA.
- ☐ I prepared a script – made my cue cards – then destroyed my script.
- ☐ I have illustrated my main points in my AVA.
- ☐ I have made a poster to support my presentation – and will display that as I speak.
- ☐ I have made a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation and embedded all my resources on that.
- ☐ I will not pass anything around because that disrupts a presentation.
- ☐ My slides and handouts are simple and clear – I have used mainly pictures – and few words.
- ☐ Each part of my presentation follows the paragraph questions.
- ☐ I discuss my evidence.
- ☐ When I want people to make notes, I will pause and let them do so.
- ☐ I have concluded each section by making a point that relates back to the overall question.
- ☐ I have remembered my signposts and my discourse markers.
- ☐ I have a conclusion that revisits my main arguments and re-states my main points.
- ☐ I am prepared for the question and answer session.
- ☐ I have checked my mannerisms or gestures (I won't fiddle with a pen or scratch my nose).
- ☐ I have practised my positive thinking.

Access the companion website to this book and find helpful resources for this chapter topic: <https://study.sagepub.com/burnsandsinfield4e>