

Practical: Oral presentation skills

Presenting information clearly and effectively is a key skill in getting your message across. Today, presentation skills are required in almost every field, and most of us are required to give presentations on occasions. While some people take this in their stride, others find it much more challenging. It is, however, possible to improve your presentation skills with a bit of work.

These can all be considered presentations.

They do not, however, all require the same approach. You would not, for example, use PowerPoint to thank a colleague who was leaving. It would be unusual (though it has been done) to use it in a speech at a wedding. However, a conference audience would be somewhat surprised NOT to see slides projected onto a screen.

It follows, therefore, that there is no single set of rules that apply to all presentations. There are, however, some things that every presentation opportunity has in common. These include:

You will present better if you have prepared effectively.

This does NOT necessarily mean that you have written out your speech verbatim and rehearsed it until you know it off by heart—although that might work for some people. It does, however, mean that you have to be confident that you are saying the right thing, in the right way, to the right people.

You need to be clear about your audience and your message.

Every presentation will be better if you have clearly considered the message that you want or need to convey, and how best to convey it to your audience. These two pieces of information drive your style, structure, content, and use of visual aids.

You must never overrun your allocated time.

In other words, don't outstay your welcome. Almost every speech or presentation is better if it is shorter. Nobody minds going for coffee early or finishing before they expected to do so. Everybody minds being held up.

Generally speaking, your audience starts on your side.

As a rule, your audience is there (more or less) voluntarily. They have chosen to listen to you, and they want to enjoy your presentation. The occasion is yours to lose.

When you present, you are in charge of the room.

The audience has effectively handed you control and is sitting back waiting for you to do something. You may have prepared a specific talk, but if you see that isn't working, you can always change it. You are, after all, the expert.

You can, for example:

- Skip through some slides to a section that they may find more interesting;
- Ask your audience whether there is particular information that they were expecting that you are not providing;
- Suggest that everyone looks a bit sleepy, and maybe it would be better to start questions early, or have a discussion; or
- Ask the audience at the start of the presentation what they are expecting and what they want you to cover. That way, you can tailor the presentation to fit their expectations.

Just as when you are facilitating, you want to help your audience get the most out of your presentation. The best way to do that is to accept feedback—which may include smiles, nods of interest, or people getting their phones out.