Advice for Preparing a Strong Oral Presentation

**Part 1: Finding clues to success in the assignment description**

If your oral presentation is a classroom assignment, the assignment description should always be your guide to success for any assignment. Here are some things to look for in the description of an oral presentation assignment.

* Is the presentation meant to inform or to persuade? Most class presentation assignments are informative. If the goal of your presentation is to persuade, convince, or promote, then make sure you keep this goal in mind as you structure your arguments.
* Is the content of your presentation drawn from a paper you have already researched or written? If so, you may not need to locate any new source material. Are you presenting material from a single source such as a book chapter? Do you need to find new resources?
* Who is your audience? If it is your classmates, are they mostly freshmen or upperclassmen? Are they students within your major, or are they unfamiliar with your topic? Have you all read the same background information? Keep your audience in mind as you make choices about your topic, the amount of background you provide, etc.
* How long should you speak? The amount of information and the detail you can convey will usually be less in a presentation than in a paper. A typical American speaks 120-150 words per minute. In a 5-minute presentation, you have time for perhaps 650-750 words. That is equivalent to 1.5 pages of single spaced type.
* Are you expected to handle questions at the end?
* Are you required or allowed to use visual aids? (See section on Visual Aids)
* Are you required or allowed to distribute a class handout?
* Does the instructor have any other special requirements?
* Most class presentations are expected to be extemporaneous. That means you are expected to draft the presentation and be well-rehearsed, but your tone should be conversational. You should not memorize or read the presentation from a script.

**Part 2. Important differences in organization, transitions, and context**

Oral presentations need many of the same things that a good written paper does-thesis, evidence, organization, etc. Consider, however, the main difference between a presentation and a paper: your words are gone the minute you speak them. With a paper, the reader can re-read a sentence that was unclear. The reader can scan ahead to preview how long the paper is or even skip to the conclusion before returning to read the body. The reader can pause when distracted or to look up an unfamiliar word. As a speaker, you must compensate for these differences to ensure that your listener receives your intended message.

**Organization & Transitions:**  
An old truism calls on speakers to “Tell them what you’re going to tell them. Tell them. And then tell them what you told them.” While no one wants you to repeat your content three times, you should certainly signal your organization at beginning, middle, and end. Repetition of key points also helps.

* Early in your talk, preview the organization of your presentation for your audience. For example,
  + “First I will describe the history of this painting. Then I’ll describe how its elements have been interpreted in the past. And finally, I will explore more modern controversies and how they connect to the book we just finished reading.”
  + “Climate scientists believe that this phenomenon has at least four contributing causes. I will describe each for you before looking at the evidence for its impacts and some possible policies to address these impacts.”
* During the body of your presentation provide more signals.
  + Use transition phrases like “the second cause,” “the final point,” “in addition to,” etc.
  + Recap to remind your listeners of prior information or to clarify points they may have missed. For example, if you are making several major points and discussing each for five minutes, your audience would probably appreciate a recap before you move to the last point. “So far I have described effect a, which was important for reason b, and effect c, which was important for reason d. Now let’s consider the final effect e, which is the most important of all.”
  + Remind the listeners of your structure when you make major transitions. “Now that I have described the theoretical background, I will present the data we collected.”
  + Repeat key words so that listeners can make connections
  + Use slight pauses for emphasis and capture the listeners’ attention and signal changes

**The Introduction:**  
Start your presentation with something to capture the attention of your audience. Give them a reason to be interested and attentive. Give them a reason to be supportive of you as the speaker. Consider starting with

* an attention-grabbing statistic,
* a striking or controversial quotation,
* an intriguing question, or
* a connection to something they are already care about

“According to the CDC, each year over 500 Americans die from bacterial meningitis. As the Center for Disease Control and Prevention points out on their website, college freshmen are among the most vulnerable groups. Have you been vaccinated?” Notice how these opening sentences capture the audience’s attention, establish the validity of their content via the authority of the CDC, and connect directly to an audience of college students who may think that such diseases primarily affect older people. The opening has been tailored to the audience.

If you are speaking about your senior research project to a group of faculty from your department, you don’t need to worry so much about capturing their attention. Your introduction might focus more on putting your work in context or establishing why the work was valuable. “As you probably know, students who worked with Dr. B in the past have investigated x, y, and z. Their results raised an intriguing question about q, which leads to my project.”

DO NOT start an academic or professional presentation with a joke. It is fine to say something amusing, but jokes unrelated to the content of your presentation are not appropriate. Jokes also risk offending or annoying members of your audience. You are trying to get them interested in your content.

While you should not try to memorize your presentation, the first sentence or two of your introduction may be an exception. Knowing precisely what you want to say and how you want to say those first sentences establishes your confidence in yourself and the audience’s confidence is you as well. Practice the first couple sentences of your presentation until the flow easily and confidently almost without you needing to think about things. Then relax into the body of your presentation

**The Conclusion:**  
As you near the end of your presentation, use signals such as “in conclusion” or “finally.” Your audience will take this as a signal to pay special attention. Remind the audience of your thesis (main point) and the most important supporting points. Do a quick re-cap and have a strong final statement. Listen to the end of several speeches given by other to see how they signal the end of the presentation. Voice intonation and body language can matter almost as much as the speaker’s words.

Similar to your introduction, you want to practice your concluding sentences carefully. Know exactly what you want to say. End strong. Don’t finish a good presentation weakly by saying, “Well I guess that is about all I have to say.” Your final words leave the final impression. If the format for your presentation includes answering questions afterwards, give your strong final statement tying back to your thesis and then say something like, “and now I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.”

**Word Choice:**  
The language in an oral presentation if generally a bit less formal than it would be in a paper on the same topic. Choose simpler words and sentence constructions. Remember, you audience can’t re-read to clarify. As the speaker, you must insure that they understand you the first time. Keep your audience in mind. Your word choices must match your audience. A history presentation to a group of history professors should be quite different than if you were presenting on the same topic to a group of freshman taking their first college history course.

**Amount of Content:**  
The amount of information and the detail you can convey will usually be less in a presentation than in a paper. A typical American speaks 120-150 words per minute. In a 5-minute presentation, you have time for perhaps 650-750 words. That is equivalent to 1.5 pages of single spaced type. And, you must leave room for signaling your organization. So, if you are asked to give a 5-minute presentation based on a 10-page paper you completed for the class, your biggest challenge may be choosing what to leave out.

**Part 3: Practice and Delivery**

**Delivery**:   
Your best possible delivery starts by preparing the best possible presentation and practicing. See other sections for tips on preparation. Delivery is a performance, and includes both verbal and non-verbal components.

* Stand in the most relaxed and natural way possible.
* It is fine to move around a bit if that feels natural, but don’t pace.
* If you are using PowerPoint, be sure that you don’t obscure the audience’s view of the slides. Do position yourself so that you can quickly glance at the slides periodically.
* Do not read your slides. See section on Visual Aids.
* Your hands should be at your side or gesturing in the ways you would naturally while speaking in a conversation.
* Don’t hold your keys, phone, or other unnecessary items. If you absolutely must hold something other than your note cards, choose a pencil or pen without a cap or retractable tip—nothing to fiddle with.
* If you are using note cards, do not read from cards. They are memory aids, not a script. Glance down periodically, but your eyes should be on your audience most of the time.
* Act calm even if you don’t feel calm. Fake it ‘til you make it.
* Smile. Project a positive feeling.
* Speak loud enough to be heard in the back of the room.
* Speak a bit more slowly than you normally would. Listen to yourself and pronounce words clearly. If you get flustered, pause for a moment. It happens to everyone. Get your thoughts back on track and continue.
* Vary your tone. Use both voice tone and body language signal your audience.
* Make eye contact with your audience throughout your talk. Scan around the room. Don’t focus on any one person, even the instructor.
* If your mouth gets dry in presentations, take some water with you. It is fine to pause for a sip but do not drink throughout your presentation.
* If you think you have been unclear on an important point, say something like “let me clarify what I meant there,” and re-phrase. Don’t fixate on every word. The natural conversational tone you want often includes small glitches. The more practiced you are, the more relaxed you will be, and the fewer glitches you’ll have.
* If you have a handout, distribute it before the start of your talk, not in the middle.
* Do not pass anything around the room. As tempting as this may be, your audience becomes distracted in the process and will miss content from your presentation. Visual props should be large enough to be seen without passing them around. You can also refer to an object in your talk and then invite audience members to view it later.

**Memory Aids, Notecards, or an Outline:**   
Make sure that you know that you know what sort of memory aids your instructor allows or requires.

* Reading from a full script is almost never allowed for a classroom presentation. Students are almost always expected to deliver a well-practiced presentation in a conversational tone. Such presentations are far more audience-friendly. A nervous novice reading a script often results in a monotone, unnatural presentation that loses the audience attention. Some disciplines expect fully scripted papers to be read out loud at professional meetings, but this requires great practice.
* Note cards are the most common memory aid. Place one main item per card. Print the text large so that you see reminders easily. A few words in a bulleted list should be enough to keep you on track. A quotation can be written in more detail. Number the cards in order. Do not read from cards.
* If your instructor requires you to submit an outline of your presentation, you may find that is also useful as your memory aid while speaking. Increase the font size so that you will be able to make out key words at a glance. Do not read from the outline.

**Practice:**   
To deliver a strong oral presentation, you must practice it.

* Complete your draft presentation two days before you are scheduled to deliver, and then practice.
* Script your introduction and conclusion more carefully than the rest of the presentation. Don’t memorize them, but the more clearly you have outlined and practiced these sections, the better your presentation will be.
* If you are going to use notecards or another memory aid, prepare them and practice with them.
* If you are going to use PowerPoint, prepare a draft of that file and practice with it. (See section on PowerPoint)
* Say your words out loud. It is okay to practice silently a few times, but you must hear yourself say the words out loud several times.
* If your presentation includes technical terms, foreign words, or any vocabulary that you would not normally use, ask your instructor for the correct pronunciation. Practice saying the terms out loud until it becomes natural.
* Stand while you speak.
* Run through your presentation start to finish without stopping several times. It is fine to stop and start in early practice attempts, but you must go through the entire presentation without stopping at least a couple of times.
* Time yourself to be sure you are within the assignment requirements. Most people speak faster when their nerves kick in, so assume your actual presentation will be a bit shorter than what you time in practice.
* If you are using PowerPoint, practice with your slides. Don’t look at the slides. Stand, face the audience, and periodically glance at the slides.
* If you will present in a classroom, practice in a classroom at least once. If you are using PowerPoint, practice with it in the classroom.
* Get a friend to sit in the back of the room while you do a practice without stopping. Practice eye contact. Have your friend time you. Get honest feedback on your voice’s volume, clarity, and pace.
* If you feel nervous, practice calming techniques. (See Nerves section)
* Consider taking your draft to the Writing Center. A tutor can provide suggestions on the outline or listen to you practice. Writing Center tutors are trained to give feedback on presentations.

**Part 4: Visual Aids and PowerPoint**

Ask your instructor whether visual aids are allowed, required, or forbidden. Some instructors have very strong views on this question, both pro and con.

Visual aids are about your audience, not the speaker. Use visual aids to

* Help the audience understand a point
* Help the audience remember information
* Help the audience understand your presentation’s organization
* Capture or maintain the audience’s attention

A physical object, photo, map, sketch, chart, or model may be a useful visual aid, but it must be large enough to be seen by everyone in the audience. Consider the size of your room and the lighting. Do not pass objects around while you speak. This distracts the audience. They should be focused on your words. Even if you are not using PowerPoint more generally, a single image can be projected on the screen if it is sufficiently valuable. Weigh off the hassle of doing so against the value it adds.

Power Point is the most common visual aid application. It is often used poorly, which is why some instructors prohibit its use. When used correctly, Power Point can help you accomplish each of the audience goals in the bulleted list above. (Did you catch yourself looking up at the list? Without having that printed list to refer to, you probably would have already forgotten one or more of the points. This is one of the challenges of delivering information orally, and one of the ways that Power Point can help.)

Keeping the goals of visual aids in mind, sketch out what would be helpful to put in Power Point. The number of slides needed depends upon the topic’s nature and the presentation’s length. As a speaker, you should expect to remain on a slide for at least one minute and often for significantly longer. Ten slides is usually about right for a 20-30 minute talk. Most typically, speakers will have

* A title slide with the presentation title and speaker’s name.
* Sometimes a slide that supports the introduction
* A slide that conveys the organization of the presentation. If your presentation is short, this may not be needed.
* Slides to support the body of the presentation.
* A concluding or summary slide
* When appropriate, an acknowledgement or sources slide. Note, however, that including sources on a slide does not relieve the speaker of the obligation to acknowledge sources verbally.

When you are ready to start drafting slides

* Choose a background with a simple graphic from the templates. You can do something fancier or of your own design, but you can devote a lot of time to something that no one will really care about. Template backgrounds also occupy space on your slides. They may interfere with pictures or charts or cause you to use smaller fonts than you would like.
* Choose a simple sans-serif font such as Ariel or Calibri. It is more important to have a font style that is easier to read than to go for a fancy font
* Keep the font size large: 44-point for titles and 28-point for the body is ideal
* Keep high contrast between your background and the text. Generally a white or light background with black or dark text is best. Light text on a dark background is also fine, but can make your room very dark if lights are turned off.
* If your slide will be mostly text, use the Rule of Sixes—6 bullet points with 6 words per line. You can put more than that on a slide, but the more you add, the harder it is for your audience to read. Also, the more text you add, the more likely you are to read to the audience, something you should not do.
* Make pictures and graphics large enough to be seen at the back of the room.
* If your slide will be a graph or chart, increase the size of the labels so that they can be seen at the back of the room. Consider deleting several rows or columns from a table to simplify it and allow you to increase the font size on what remains. A chart or graph that your audience cannot read is useless.

**Part 5: Nerves are normal; here’s how to deal with them**

It is normal to be nervous before an oral presentation. You are doing something unfamiliar, and you are being graded or judged in some way. It feels risky. The human body kicks in with a fight or flight response that helped keep our ancestors alive but that can also be disconcerting.

Extra adrenaline is pumped out by your adrenal gland to ready to you for fight or flight. Your heart and breathing rate increase. Blood flow increases to your major muscles but decreases elsewhere. Digestion slows down, which makes your gut feel bad. Your skin may be usually hot or cold. Your pupils dilate. Your mouth becomes dry. You may need to get to the bathroom urgently. Some of these responses are useful if you need to run from a predator, but they are also strange, uncomfortable, and even scary as you prepare for an oral presentation. So, what can you do?

* Recognize that these symptoms as normal. Everyone has them. Some people feel these responses more strongly than others.
* Take several deep, slow breaths. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Breathe slowly.
* Relax your muscles. Work systematically from face, to neck, shoulders, arms, chest, and all the way to your toes. Focus on relaxing each body part.
* Visualize a successful presentation.
* Get a good night’s sleep before your presentation.
* Get some exercise.
* Cut back on caffeine.
* Complete your draft presentation at least two days early and then spend time in those two days practicing. The more practiced you are, the easier it will be to control your nerves. See the section on Practice and Delivery for more ideas.
* Arrive at the place where you will deliver your presentation early, so that you can settle in and get comfortable with the space.
* Project a calm exterior even if you are nervous inside. Acting calm helps you become calm.
* If you see a counselor for anxiety or stress, seek the advice of that professional who knows you best. Do this long before you are scheduled for the presentation.

**Part 6: Citations in oral presentations**

We must always acknowledge the ideas, opinions, words, data, and visual elements that we are using, but that were developed by others. Unless your instructor requires a particular format, you have more flexibility in a citation within a presentation. Note, however, that some instructors require outlines or handouts with full citations as they would be used in a written paper. Be sure to ask how you should handle citations.

Start by taking careful notes on the sources of ideas, opinions, words, data, photos, graphs, and tables as you gather information. In your presentation, you should acknowledge the person (or organization) that created the work initially and where you found the material.

In an oral presentation, don’t use direct quotations for anything that can be explained in your own words. Direct quotations within an oral presentation should be reserved for unique phrasing or opinions. So, you might say “As Martin Luther King, Jr. said in his famous 1963 ‘I Have a Dream Speech . . .” Or, “In his 2017 Inaugural address, Donald Trump claimed . . .” A quotation from a book or magazine should be acknowledged with the names of the author and publication.

It is far more challenging to provide a full citation to a journal article in an oral format. Many speakers will place the full citation on a Power Point slide or on a handout if used. If this case, a very simple oral acknowledgement is sufficient. For example, you might say “As Li and co-workers have shown, . . .” The Power Point slide then shows the full citation to this work as it would appear on a Works Cited page of a paper. The preferred format varies with discipline, so be sure to

All visual elements—photographs, charts, graphs, cartoons, and similar visuals—included in a PowerPoint slide or handout must include a source citation unless you have created them yourself.

**Part 7: Special Settings**

An oral presentation must fit both the purpose and audience.

1. Presenting research on campus.

Ask your research advisor to clarify expectations, which vary by discipline and audience. You may be told to focus most heavily on methods, results, and conclusions when presenting a research project than when providing a general presentation. If you are presenting chemistry research to an audience of six chemistry professors, they will expect technical content. If you are presenting the same research project at a campus showcase to an audience of students who may have no chemistry background, you will need to provide more background and context. Suh an audience needs far less technical content. Know how much time you are allotted. You are likely to have far more content than time, and will need to ma careful choices about what content is most important to include. Research presentations are almost always followed by a question and answer period. Cue your audience by ending your presentation with a statement welcoming questions.

1. Presenting research at a professional meeting

Professional meetings have very specific expectations and standards. Ask your advisor about these. You may also find information on the website for the conference. Your audience will be very knowledgeable about your discipline and will likely expect technical content. You may also need to place your research in context with other current research. Be sure you acknowledge the work of others.

1. Poster sessions

At a poster session, the presenter stands next to a large poster that summarizes the material normally covered in an oral presentation. You should be prepared to deliver a concise one-minute summary of the project focusing on the central question and the conclusion. Many visitors to your poster will stay for just that quick summary. If someone stops at your poster, you might ask, “Would you like me to give you a quick overview?” They may move on after that summary or they may ask more specific questions. Be prepared to provide both general and technical responses. Take cues from the sophistication of the questions to determine the type of response to provide.

1. Group presentations

A group presentation should still feel like one unified presentation. In general, each member of the group should present a discrete section of the material—introduction, theory, methods, data, conclusions, etc. The biggest challenge is to make the entire presentation sound unified. You should have clear expectations about how much time each team member will use. You must outline the material that each person will cover, and then practice as a team. You need to avoid unintended repetition as well as gaps. Practice out loud as a team. If your presentation will be followed by questions, discuss how you will handle those. Is one team member better able to answer certain questions? In general, it is not good to have just one team member handle all the questions since that makes the other team members seem less capable.