

# Painless Presentations

If you are required to make a presentation as part of an employer's selection process and have little or no knowledge of how to make a formal, verbal presentation this leaflet will help you. It will not turn you into the world's best public speaker in an instant; confidence only comes with practice! It will however, provide you with an understanding of basic principles and a preparation checklist to help you design and deliver your presentation competently.

This leaflet is divided into three sections:

- **Guidance Notes:** these provide a general introduction to the basics of presentations, covering structure, delivery, visual aids, handling questions and a summary.
- **Preparation Checklist:** A checklist for you to use when planning your presentation.
- **Additional Resources:** Some recommended resources available.

The information and tips in this handout are a starting point; use it as a means of support whilst you gain confidence. Over time and with further opportunities to make presentations you will develop your own style.

## Guidance notes

Our first tip: Where you are free to choose your own topic, go for something you will feel comfortable with, and enthusiastic talking about, rather than one which you think will impress your audience. There are four basic factors that affect the overall impression you make on your audience: the structure and content; style of delivery; use of visual aids; and handling of questions. We'll focus on each of these in turn, but before that you need to do some groundwork.

### Before starting ask yourself these questions:

- What is the aim of my talk? Is it to inform, to persuade, to amuse?
- What are the key points I want to get across to my audience?
- How long have I got?
- Who is my audience?
- How many people am I presenting to?
- What do they know about my topic?

Your answers determine how you approach the four key elements of delivering your presentation:

## Structure and content

All presentations should have a beginning, middle and an end. At the beginning, you should introduce what you are about to say; in the middle you say it, and at the end you conclude by telling the audience what you have just said. It may be a simplistic model but it makes for effective presentations.

**The introduction** (beginning): - include an outline of what you will be covering and the structure you will follow. You should also put the content of the talk into some context; this is particularly important for an audience with little knowledge of your topic. Include the objectives of your presentation and an indication of whether you are happy to take questions throughout (best avoided until you are a confident presenter) or at the end of your presentation.

**The content** (middle) of your presentation should develop logically. Points should be made clearly and 'signposted' so when changing subjects and moving on to make new points, linkage should be clear. Let your



audience know that you have finished talking about subject A and are now talking about subject B. For example: 'I have just made the point that..., now let us move on to...'. The style (formal or informal) you use to flag changes or points may differ to be in tune with your topic or audience.

**Conclusion** (the end): - briefly summarise your main points 'telling the audience what you have told them'. It is important that you finish your presentation cleanly, rather than trailing off inconclusively. This should be done with a concluding sentence or two, related to the objectives you stated at the beginning. For example, 'What I hope to have achieved through discussing these points is to have shown that...'.

Of course we can't tell you what the content of your talk should be but always ensure that you have researched and understood your topic and that your presentation is pitched to suit the needs of your audience. Making a presentation about your favourite hobby to a group of fellow enthusiasts might be quite different to the talk on the same subject you might give to a panel of employers during a selection exercise for example.

Whatever your topic or audience avoid trying to cover too much ground or complicated subject matter and remember the acronym: *KIS – Keep it Simple!*

### **Delivery**

No matter how good the structure of your talk is, the way you put it across to your audience is of key importance, governing the impression you make. Preparation, again, is vital.

Rehearse! You may feel self-conscious initially but speak it through out loud to judge just how long your talk is – you must run to time. If you can face it, try it out in front of a sympathetic friend or two.

Know your presentation well enough to use prompt cards (small cards with key points or phrases on them acting as prompts). Do not attempt to read your presentation from a script - your audience can do that for themselves; you need to add another dimension to the words used in visual aids.

Look at your audience. Do not look at the floor, ceiling, back wall, or projector screen. Engage with them – you will find a friendly face or two out there and they will provide encouragement with nods and a smile; you can smile too. Resist the temptation to talk only to the friendly face and take in all the audience as you speak.

Speak clearly, varying the pace and rhythm of your speech to maintain the interest of your audience. If your voice tends to rise when you are nervous speak at a slightly lower pitch and a little more slowly (many people rush when speaking in public) – tone down, slow down.

Use language appropriate to your audience; don't talk up or down to them. This is particularly important when presenting technical material to a non-technical audience. Unless you know your audience understands the abbreviations or jargon related to your topic avoid them, or explain them.

Are you going to sit or stand to make your presentation? Standing may be more appropriate with a formal presentation. If you are standing, move around a little to help keep your audience interested. Use appropriate gestures to help illustrate what you are saying. Whichever you choose, try to appear comfortable and natural, even if you don't feel it.

Nearly everybody feels nervous when making presentations. Practising your presentation helps considerably and the more you do the better you will feel. Knowing you have prepared thoroughly is your best defence against nerves; a few quiet moments and deep breaths before you start will also help.

Remember the audience is generally on your side and wants to see you do well. Mistakes that you think are enormous are probably not even noticed by an audience. If you do make a significant mistake or lose track of where you are, as everybody does at some time, stop, look at your notes, get your bearings, take a deep breath to relax, and carry on. The audience will understand.

If you have a time limit for your talk, make sure that you stick to it and have material to fill the time comfortably. Many people try to do too much so remember:

- *Keep It Simple*

- *Don't go on for too long or stop too soon*

## **Visual aids**

Visual aids are used to help convey ideas and information in a way that enhances understanding; they can also act as your key points prompts.

Make sure you know how to set up, switch on and operate any equipment you will be using and practise your presentation. There are many visual aids available to presenters. These include computer generated images through digital projectors, handouts, white boards, flip charts, slides, models, etc.

Remember that visual aids are used to support the spoken presentation and should be used to illustrate and highlight key points. They can also be used to provide an outline structure to keep you and your audience focussed. They do not detail everything you are going to say!

Work out beforehand exactly what you want from a particular visual and think about other ways of presenting the same information. Instead of tables of figures, perhaps you could use a graph; remember they are visual aids. Make them as simple and as clear as possible. Too much information on one visual aid makes it difficult for the audience to read and they won't be listening to you whilst they are reading. If you are inexperienced go for the simplest forms of visual aids – avoid flashy technology until you are more practiced.

When using slides (eg, PowerPoint) limit the number you use and the information on them – as a general rule, no more than 6 lines of text on a slide and 6 words per line (the 6 x 6 rule). Use clear, readable fonts in a good size and strong dark colours on a light background – soft colours won't show up on projection. Keep the on-screen information as simple as possible – you can always provide a handout with full details.

## **Handling questions**

Here your audience has an opportunity to participate, developing their understanding of what you have said, and indirectly, testing your grasp of your topic. Your presentation is not over yet! It is important that you know what you are talking about.

Let your audience know at the beginning when you will take questions. Some people like to field questions during the presentation, others at the end. It is up to you – it is your presentation. If asked a question during your presentation which you are not ready to answer, say that you will come back to that point at the end of the talk. As a novice you may find it easier to ask for questions to be held back until you finish your presentation so that your flow is not interrupted.

Ensure that you fully understand the question; if not, ask the person to repeat or explain it further then answer clearly and succinctly. If you feel unable to answer the question it is usually safer to say so than to try to bluff or waffle your way through, particularly when you are presenting to an audience with some knowledge of your subject. It might be appropriate to take contact details and get back to them later; probably not so practical in an interview setting.

## **Summary**

Rehearsal is the only way to check you have managed to get everything right. You will also be pleasantly surprised at how much better you will feel making the presentation when you have already done it several times before. Talking your presentation through in your head will always take less time than the real thing so pluck up courage and speak it through at a pace that is comfortable for you and your audience.

These notes are a guide to help you. As you become more experienced, experiment and develop your own style of presentation. Remember, it is important that you feel comfortable with what you are doing! Think about presenters who have impressed you – one of their strengths will be that they have a personal style rather than following the model approach we all start out with. Eventually, the 'rules' will become second nature leaving you to concentrate on engaging with your audience.

When you are new to presenting, a clear structure provides you with a lot of support to keep you focussed on what you are trying to achieve. Your audience will understand that you are new to this and make allowance for nerves and the odd hiccup – don't be deterred and keep going.

# Preparation checklist

## Before you start

- Is your presentation right for your audience, room size, objectives and time available?
- Do you know your topic?
- Do you need support from visual aids? What is available to you?

## Structure

- Beginning Does it contain a clear outline of the talk, set the context and state your objectives?

Do you say when you will deal with questions? Are you providing a handout?

- Middle Are your main points clear? Do they follow each other logically, linking together well? Are they well 'signposted', covering the material you want to cover?
- End Sum up the main points and make a strong conclusion.

## Delivery

- Have you rehearsed your presentation? Are you going to talk from cards?
- Are you going to sit or stand?
- Are you using good eye contact, body posture, gestures?
- Is your voice varied in tone and pace?
- Is the language you are using appropriate for your audience?
- If questions are likely to be asked, can you handle them comfortably?
- Do you know how to use your visual aids?
- Do you keep to time? (You'll be surprised how quickly the time goes)

## Visual aids

- Are your visual aids appropriate, simple, interesting and easy to read?
- Have you kept them to a minimum?
- Do they follow the 6 (lines) x 6 (words) guideline for each slide?
- Do they fit well with your talk and add to your presentation?
- Are you providing a handout? (no more than one sheet of A4)

## Handling questions

- Do you have sufficient knowledge of your topic to deal with questions?
- Can you anticipate and prepare for any likely questions?
- Listen carefully and make sure you understand the question being asked
- Answer clearly and ask if your response has answered the question
- If you really don't know the answer then say so rather than waffle or panic

## After the presentation

You will probably feel relieved that it is over and will have an impression of how the talk went. Reflect on what went well and areas where you felt a little under-confident or flustered. Think about how you can get around any difficulties – do you need more preparation, fewer or simpler visual aids, better voice control or just a bit more practice and confidence? Employers sometimes provide feedback so check whether they are willing to in your case.

## Additional Recourses

If you would like more detailed information about making presentations, there are some resources available that may be helpful:

- Books available in the Careers Service: e.g: 'Perfect Presentations' Levin and Topping
- Online talks and DVDs on Careers Service website: Assessment Centres – Presentations (6 mins)
- Other websites: eg [www.mindtools.com](http://www.mindtools.com) Communications Toolkit (Presentations)