

Painless Presentations

You may be asked to make a presentation as part of an interview or at an assessment centre. Usually, you are given a topic beforehand but if you are free to choose your own, go for something you will feel comfortable with, and enthusiastic talking about, rather than one which you think will impress your audience.

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 and what do they know about my topic?

Always ensure that you have researched and understood your topic and that your presentation is pitched to suit the needs of your audience. There are four key elements in delivering your presentation which we will cover in turn

Structure and content

All presentations should have a beginning, middle and an end. Whatever your topic or audience avoid trying to cover too much ground or complicated subject matter and remember the acronym: **KIS – Keep it Simple!**

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...'

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). Do not attempt to read your presentation from a script - your audience can do that for themselves.



Look at your audience and engage with them – try to find a friendly face or two out there who will provide encouragement with nods and a smile; you can smile too. Resist the temptation to talk only to the friendly face though, 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). Use language appropriate to your audience. This is particularly important when presenting technical material to a non-technical audience. Avoid jargon or abbreviations unless you know your audience understands them.

Stand up if you can and move around a little to help keep your audience interested. Use appropriate gestures to help illustrate what you are saying. Try to appear comfortable and natural, even if you don't feel it. If you have a time limit for your talk, make sure that you stick to it and have material to fill the time comfortably.

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 any equipment you will be using and practise your presentation. There are many visual aids available to presenters, the most common is Powerpoint, but you could also use others such as handouts, whiteboards and flip charts. Remember that visual aids do not need to detail everything you are going to say! They should be used as prompts to support your presentation and highlight key points. They can also be used to provide an outline structure to keep you and your audience focussed.

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.

If you are using PowerPoint or something similar, limit the number of slides you use and the information on them – as a general rule, no more than 6 lines of text on each slide and 6 words per line (the 6 x 6 rule). Use clear fonts in a good size and strong dark colours on a light background – soft colours won't show up on projection.

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, 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.

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. Employers sometimes provide feedback so check whether they are willing to in your case.

Remember the audience is generally on your side and wants to see you do well. Mistakes that you think are enormous probably go unnoticed. 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.