

Oral Presentations

Often students are asked to present information and findings from either group work or individual efforts on a topic related to their course. We've put together a resource with information that should help you prepare, organize and effectively give an oral presentation.

Preparing for an Oral Presentation

Standing in front of a group to make a presentation can be stressful for many. Preparation helps to reduce that anxiety. Start preparing your presentation early to ensure you are comfortable with the material and confident in your plan to present it.

Clarify Assignment Instructions

- How long should the presentation be?
- Are you expected to take a point-of-view and support that point-of-view or should you just give information about your topic without taking a particular position?
- Are you expected to do research and/or just use your own knowledge?
- Does your instructor have requirements outlining the number and type of sources you are supposed to use?
- Does your instructor have expectations about supporting visual material such as PowerPoint presentations, graphs, maps, or handouts?
- What are the instructor's criteria for an excellent presentation?

Choose and Focus Your Topic

- If you can, select a topic that interests you. Speakers tend to do a better job when they speak about something they care about.
- For topic ideas, start by looking in your textbook. Look over the headings in your text. Another good source of ideas is your lecture notes.
- Once you've decided on or have been given your topic, you probably need to focus it more. Trying to do a short presentation of 5 or 10 minutes on an overly general subject like 'global warming' is a significant challenge. Narrow your topic so that you can explore it in some depth within your time limit.
- To narrow your topic, create questions about it using question words "Who," "What," "When," "Where," "Why" and "How."
- When you have found one or a few related questions that you think are interesting, you are probably ready to begin gathering your information.

Consider Your Audience

- How much does your audience already know about your topic? You don't want to tell them what they already know. Alternatively, you need to make sure your audience has the background knowledge to understand your ideas. You may need to define key terms and concepts.
- Will your audience be interested in your topic, or do you need to put a lot of effort into motivating them to listen? Do you need to change your topic or find a more interesting angle to engage their interest?
- How will your topic be useful for your audience? Tell them why they want to know what you are going to tell them.

Gather Information

- For most presentations, you need to start by doing some general research at the library and/or online.
- This may involve reading a section of your text, consulting a specialized encyclopedia in the library, or skimming a book chapter on your topic. This should build your background knowledge and give you an idea of some of the sub-topics you may want to include in your presentation.
- Once you've identified those sub-topics, check that there is information available about them. This involves looking for useful resources.
- If you have difficulty finding resources, you may need help in developing your research skills. Ask a librarian for help if you need it.
- Once you are confident there is enough information available on your topic, begin to make notes on your sources. It is a good idea to take notes for each of the sub-topics you identified.

Organize Ideas

- Using the gathered information, make an outline for your presentation by making notes of the main points you want to make and the specific facts, quotes or explanations you want to use to support those points.
- Organize your ideas into an introduction, a body and a conclusion.

Prepare Notes and Visuals

- Use notes to think about the ideas as you talk. This makes your presentation much more effective than one that is memorized or read.
- Make presentation notes containing just keywords and ideas.
- Put your notes on index cards (number the cards in case they get out of order), or on paper.
- Use visuals to help make your organization clear, to emphasize important points, to illustrate key points, to introduce humour and to help listeners understand you better.
- Consider using overheads, handouts, PowerPoint, and videos.

Practice, Revise, and Practice, Practice, Practice!

- Practise often to make your presentation smooth and understandable. It will also make you more confident and familiar with the information.
- While practising, you will find aspects of the presentation that need revision. Maybe you need to add in some more details, change the order of ideas, or come up with some added visuals. Look for ways you could revise it to make it more effective. Alter your notes as needed.
- Once you feel comfortable with the content and organization, practise again focusing on your presentation speed. Remember that your audience needs time to think about your ideas. Don't be afraid of a few seconds of silence here and there.
- Time yourself and adjust your content to make it fit within the time limit. This is very important. If you go over-time, it may negatively impact others who come after you. You may also lose marks for it.
- Make sure you know how to pronounce specialized words in your presentation. Check the pronunciation in a dictionary or ask your teacher.
- Practise again with your visual aids.
- Present to a real person. This can be a classmate, a tutor or even a friend or family member. Work on making eye contact with your audience. Do not hide behind your notes.

Organizing an Oral Presentation

The main parts of an oral presentation are the same ones used when writing an essay - the introduction, the body and the conclusion.

The Introduction (10-15% of the Presentation's Length)

- Purpose of the introduction
 - Engage the listeners' interest.
 - State your point of view and/or the purpose of your presentation.
 - Explain how your presentation is organized.
- Tips
 - Begin by greeting your audience.
 - Engage your listeners with a startling or engaging idea. This might be an anecdote, a surprising fact or statistic, a cartoon, or a quotation.
 - Make a transition to your purpose and/or point of view. Is your purpose to inform, persuade, review literature, explain a personal experience, generate discussion, motivate, entertain or something else? You should state this in your introduction. Make your point of view as specific as possible.
 - Explain how the presentation is organized. Showing a PowerPoint slide or overhead identifying the key parts of the presentation can be useful as it makes the organization clear.

The Body (75-80% of the Presentation's Length)

- Purpose of the Body
 - Support your point of view or explain your topic. Typically, you divide the body into a variety of sections.
 - For each section, you need to state a central point and then provide supporting evidence (e.g., facts, explanation, anecdotes, statistics, examples, quotes, description).
 - After providing evidence for a point, you need to state clearly how the evidence relates to the main idea or the overall point of view of your talk.
- Clearly Show the Links Between Ideas
 - Use transition words and expressions that show the relationships between one idea and the next.
 - You need to do more of this linking of ideas in an oral presentation than in a paper. When someone reads a paper, they can always go back and re-read previous parts if they get lost, but they can't re-listen if they get lost while listening.
- Use Strategies that Keep your Listeners Engaged
 - Explain abstract ideas by comparing them to concrete and familiar ideas. For example, "This program will cost over \$35 million, that's about one dollar for every Canadian."
 - Another strategy is to personalize your ideas. If possible, include personal experience, stories and examples; they are more engaging than a long list of facts and figures.
 - Don't plan to talk about too many ideas. It's better to say more things about a few ideas than to say a little about a lot of ideas.
 - It's essential when planning your body not to leave the most important information until the end. If you run out of time, you will have missed your best points.

The Conclusion (10% of the Presentation's Length)

- Purpose of the Conclusion
 - To review the talk's key ideas and to provide closure for the presentation. It may also serve as a transition to a question period or discussion.
- Parts of a Conclusion
 - A transition indicating that the end is near. Try, "To end, ..." or "In conclusion, ..."
 - A summary of the talk's main arguments
 - Restatement of the purpose and/or point of view
 - Suggested next steps (possible questions for discussion or actions for listeners to take) or implications of the information given (answer the question "So what?").
 - Thank the audience for their attention.

Information adapted from Douglas College Learning Centre. (2021). Preparing a Class Presentation & Organizing a Class Presentation. Douglas College.

<https://library.douglascollege.ca/sites/default/files/RS8.20%20Organizing%20an%20Class%20presentation.pdf>

<https://library.douglascollege.ca/sites/default/files/RS8.10%20Preparing%20an%20Class%20Presentation.pdf>

Have questions? Contact the Senior Manager of Student Learning Support & Disability Resources.

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