

Delivering a Presentation

Frequently Asked Questions about delivering an oral presentation, include:

- **Should I read my presentation from a script, or should I deliver it from an outline?**

Both of these methods can be effective; each one has pros and cons. Choose the format that feels most comfortable to you.

<u>Format</u>	<u>Pros</u>	<u>Cons</u>
Reading from a script...	Helps ensure you remember the details. Gives you better control over the length of your presentation.	Can impede natural and spontaneous interactions with your audience.
Delivering from an outline...	Lets you have more eye contact with your audience, thereby promoting responsiveness.	Requires you to rely heavily on your memory. Leaves more uncertainty about exactly how long it will take you to deliver the presentation.

Whether you choose to deliver your presentation from a script or an outline;

- ✓ Write out your presentation word for word.
- ✓ Make several drafts and go through them, experimenting with what to include, what to exclude, how to express your ideas, and how to organize them.
- ✓ Practice multiple times to reduce your dependency on your script or outline; alter them as necessary after practicing.

Practice alone a few times to get comfortable, then practice in front of someone who knows about your topic, and then try practicing in front of someone who's not familiar with your topic or discipline.

Keep in mind that you're not trying to memorize the presentation. You're working to familiarize yourself with the script or outline so that you don't have to keep your eyes on it for the entire length of your presentation.

Once you have a final draft, have read through it many times, and have practiced many times, you can decide if you would like to deliver it from the **script** or from an **outline**.

If you decide to use a script...

Speak rather than read

Make sure you know the script inside and out, so that you can look up from it and hear yourself talk rather than focusing on reading.

To help make sure you're speaking rather than reading,

- ✓ Make your script as reader-friendly as possible.
- ✓ Be sure that the font is big enough for you to read easily.
- ✓ Double- or even triple-space the text.
- ✓ Type or write on only one side of the page, and make sure to number the pages in case you drop them.

Make it easy to navigate through the script

Consider using bullet points, boldface, underlining, or whatever other formatting techniques work for you. Make your signposts easy to find. And mark your script to note pauses, volume shifts, where to slow down, etc.

If you decide to use an outline...

Keep the outline very straightforward

Make the print large and easy to read, and be sure to label sections well so that it's easy for you to find your place. In general, your outline should offer you a clear visual picture of your presentation's structure.

Consider writing out full sentences for particularly important examples and transition statements

Most presenters do not generally write out their sentences word-for-word in an outline, but doing so can help make sure you communicate your most important ideas as clearly and persuasively as you want to, without having to memorize them verbatim.

• How can I control my nerves during my presentation?

Remember that **it's okay to feel nervous**. Most presenters feel their stomachs flutter or their palms sweat! Your nerves are usually more noticeable to you than they are to your audience. Your audience is there because they're interested in what you have to say, and **they want you to do well**.

Find out as much as you can about what to expect during your presentation: the size of the room, who will attend, how many will attend, what audience members will be expecting, etc.

Practice, Practice, Practice! The more comfortable you are with your presentation, the less your nerves will affect you.

Dress appropriately. It's easier to feel (and be) professional if you look the part. As a rule of thumb, avoid jeans, and wear something you would wear to a formal job interview.

Keep the purpose of your presentation clear in your mind. Focus on your purpose rather than on your anxiety.

Take a deep breath before you begin, and focus on friendly faces in the crowd.

- **What should I keep in mind about my voice?**

Vary your pitch and volume as appropriate throughout your presentation, keeping in mind that this kind of variation is one of the best ways to emphasize key points and keep audiences engaged. You will need to project your voice, but you don't always need to be *loud*. Work to keep your pitch mostly in your lower register, especially if you're a woman.

Remember to **take big breaths**. They will help you to **keep a steady pace** and to calm your nerves.

Don't rush! Pay attention to how quickly you're speaking. Too often, people try to fit 20 minutes of material into 10 minutes, and the result is incomprehensible. Watch your audience for signs of understanding or puzzlement, and make adjustments accordingly. If

you can, ask a friend or acquaintance to sit in the front or back row and signal if you're speaking too quickly.

Use pauses to your advantage. Brief, intentional pauses of even a second or two can cue the listener that something new or important is coming up. If a particular point is important, speak it at a distinctly slower pace.

Be conscious of verbal tics and do your best to eliminate them. “Um,” “aah,” “like,” and “you know” are nervous tics that fill space. It is difficult to eliminate these completely, but being aware of them will help. When practicing your presentation, ask a friend or colleague to keep an accurate count of how many times you use these words and sounds, and try to reduce that number over time.

- **What about my body language?**

Your posture should communicate confidence and calmness. Don't lean on the podium, shift your weight from one foot to the other too often, hang onto the back of a chair, slouch (especially if you're sitting), continually cross and uncross your arms and/or legs, or stand ramrod straight and motionless.

Make frequent eye contact with the audience. If strong eye contact is uncomfortable for you, then at least look to the back of the room to create the illusion of eye contact.

If you're using a microphone, know how it works. Feel free to adjust the microphone, and don't panic if it gives feedback while you're adjusting it. Remember to keep your

mouth close to the microphone, especially if it's a unidirectional microphone. Ask the audience if they can hear you.

Feel free to pause and take a quick drink of water if you need it, but don't drink from a carbonated beverage.

- **How can I be a good member of my panel?**

Stay within your allotted time. If you find that you're about to run out of time, don't stick to your original outline or script. Instead, briefly list the main points or evidence that you would have covered and offer to elaborate during the Q&A.

While other panelists are presenting, **listen and take notes**; you may be asked to respond or think about connections between all of the presentations.

Don't shuffle your papers or do anything else that might distract audience members during the other panelists' presentations.

- **What options do I have for visual aids?**

You have two main options for visual aids: paper handouts; or projected overheads or PowerPoint slides. Check with your mentor about what sorts of visual aids would work the best for your particular project. In general, here are some pros and cons:

Type of Aid	Pros	Cons
Handouts...	<p>help listeners follow your main points.</p> <p>can help you deal with long but important quotes or data sets.</p> <p>give people a space for taking notes.</p> <p>give people your name and contact information to take away.</p>	<p>can tempt audience members to read ahead and stop paying attention to what you're saying.</p> <p>can irritate your audience if you don't bring enough for everyone.</p>
Overheads or PowerPoint Slides...	<p>help listeners follow your main points.</p> <p>can help you deal with long but important quotes or data sets.</p> <p>allow you to control when and how long people see the information, which helps make sure that it doesn't distract from your speaking.</p> <p>allows everyone to see the visual aid without your having to worry about how many people to expect.</p>	<p>can cause anxiety if you're not comfortable using the equipment or if the equipment is not present or fails to work properly.</p> <p>can be awkward to speak from by tempting you to turn your back to your audience as you look at the projection screen.</p>

Whichever type of visual aid you choose, remember that **visual aids should complement your presentation, not distract from it.** Use handouts or overheads or slides with a clear purpose in mind, not to “dress up” your presentation. Remember, with visual aids, less is more!

- **How can I use handouts effectively?**

Be wary of giving too much information or too many distracting details; people will start reading your handout and stop listening to you.

Plan carefully when you will distribute your handouts, and remember that it will take a couple of minutes for the pages to circulate around the room.

Let your audience know how you will be using the handout: is it an outline, an important quote, a presentation of data, or what? Refer to the handout while you speak, and be very clear about what part of the handout you are referring to.

Leave plenty of space on the page for people to take notes.

Practice referring to the handout during your talk. Note in your script or outline where you want to refer to the handout and what you want to say about it.

- **How can I use overheads or PowerPoint effectively?**

Don't include too much information. Your visual aids should not simply list every point in your presentation; they should emphasize your most important ideas and

examples. Too much information or too many details will distract your audience from what you're saying.

Make sure your audience will be able to read and comprehend the projected information quickly. Be careful about making text too small, including too much information on one overhead or slide, etc.

Don't move on to the next overhead or slide too early; audience members will automatically begin reading the information on the aid and stop listening to you. Practice often, so that you know exactly when to move to the next overhead or slide.

Don't look back and read the information off the screen. You can refer to particular details with a pointer if necessary, but have your outline or notes in front of you so that you don't speak with your back to the audience.

Practice referring to the overheads or slides during your presentation.

Q & A Period

- **What will the Question and Answer period be like?**

The question and answer period is your chance to receive feedback about your work. It also offers you the opportunity to show how much you know about your topic and how well you can think on your feet. Here are some general tips:

Be **patient** while listening and **courteous** when answering.

Repeat the question to make sure everyone in the audience has heard it.

Respond to the entire audience, not just the questioner.

Keep your answers relatively brief.

- **How can I prepare for the Question and Answer period?**

The best way to prepare is to practice delivering your presentation in front of a small audience and ask them what kinds of questions the presentation raises for them. You can either use your friends, roommates, or classmates, or you can sign up for an appointment with a Writing Center instructor (call 263-1992).

Similarly, you should ask your mentor for feedback about the kinds of questions you might encounter.

Finally, refresh your memory about the larger project on which your presentation is based. Make sure the details are still clear in your mind, so that you're able to draw on this broader information to answer questions. Think about the information you left out or only mention briefly in your presentation, and be able to talk about it if audience members ask.

- **What if I don't understand a question that someone asks me?**

Sometimes questions are long, or phrased in a way that is unclear. If you're not sure what someone is asking, request a clarification by saying something like:

- "I'm not sure if I'm understanding your question correctly. Are you asking whether..."
or
- "Let me make sure I'm clear about what you're asking. Are you interested in..."

Audience members appreciate this kind of clarification much more than a vague answer to a vague question.

- **What if I understand the question someone is asking, but don't know the answer?**

Don't panic! And don't be afraid to repeat the question and then take a moment to think. Often, an answer will come to you if you take a bit of time to consider the question. If it doesn't, though, here are some suggestions:

Be frank. You're not expected to know everything, so if you don't have an answer, say so. It's perfectly acceptable to say something like:

- ✓ “That’s a really interesting question. I hadn’t quite thought about it that way, but I definitely will as I keep working on this project. Thank you bringing it up.”

Answer a different (but related) question that you do have an answer to. Feel free to say something like:

- ✓ “I’ll have to keep thinking about that question, although I can tell you that...”

This allows you to acknowledge that you don't have an answer to the question, while still allowing you to display your knowledge about the topic.

Offer to chat with the person who asked the question after the panel is over. This would give you the opportunity to learn more from the questioner about what he/she was thinking and have a conversation in a less formal context, away from the rest of the audience. Simply say something like:

- ✓ “That’s a really interesting question. I hadn’t quite thought about it that way. Maybe we could talk about it for a few minutes afterwards.”

Remember, the reason you're presenting at a symposium is to **get feedback and to make connections with people who are interested in your work.** Offering to extend the conversation past the end of the panel is a great way to make these kinds of connections and receive in-depth feedback about your project.

- **What if someone asks a question that's not very relevant to my project or to the topic of my panel?**

Ask for more clarification. The person asking the question probably does see a connection between the issue he/she has raised and the material you presented. Don't feel like you have to read his/her mind. Instead, ask something like:

- "I don't quite understand your question. Could you provide a bit more explanation about how [the issue you raised] is related to my work?" or
- "I don't quite understand your question. What part of my talk prompted you to think about this issue?"

Once they have made the connection more explicit, you may very well be able to offer a satisfactory answer. If you still aren't sure how to answer, however, try one of the tips above, such as being frank about your inability to answer, answering a different (but related) question that you do have an answer to, or offering to chat in person after the panel is finished.