

Improving your Presentation Skills

Independent Study version

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Introduction

You don't have to have perfect spoken English to give a very effective presentation. In fact, even native speakers find presenting difficult. There is a lot more to presenting than knowing the language well.

Among the key aspects of a successful oral presentation are: having a firm idea of what your audience already knows, careful presentation and rehearsal, making clear the structure of your talk clear, and dealing effectively with questions.

The materials in this Independent Study guide have been designed to support international students as they work through the various stages of preparing, rehearsing and delivering a presentation. They take the form of five Checklists on different aspects of presenting.

Planning / choosing a topic

At this first stage, study **Checklists 1-3: *Preparing a Presentation*** (pages 2-3); *Using Visual Aids, Handouts and Notes* (pages 4-5), and *Signposts and Language Signals* (pages 6-7).

Rehearsal

Before you start rehearsing your talk, read through **Checklist 4** on *Non-verbal communication* (pages 8-9) and think about the points mentioned there.

Apart from the obvious benefits of practice, rehearsing allows you to **time** your presentation. It tends to take about 20% longer to talk 'live' to an audience than in the rehearsal. We strongly recommend you record yourself as you practise giving your presentation.

Replay and listen carefully to what you said and how you said it. If you can ask someone else to listen to it and tell you where they didn't understand, so much the better. Note the points you need to improve. Record yourself again. The more often you can practise and reflect on your performance, the more polished the final result will be.

Giving the presentation

At the end of your presentation, the audience will ask questions and raise points for discussion. Think about the probable questions and discussion points before you give the presentation. In preparing for your talk, look through **Checklist 5** on *Asking and dealing with questions* (pages 10-11).

Remember to **repeat or summarise each question**, in order to make sure you (and the audience) have got it right – and to give yourself a little longer to think about your answer.

Good luck!

Presentation Skills

Checklist 1 PREPARING A PRESENTATION

STEP 1 Think about the context of the presentation: who are the audience, and what are their interests? how big will the audience be? how long is the presentation to be? what equipment is available for visual aids? what about time for questions?

STEP 2 Decide on your topic. Think carefully about the main point or points that you want to communicate. You should be able to write these clearly in one or two sentences.

STEP 3 Structure the content. Most people begin with an unordered collection of ideas, and then put them into sequence. Then decide on the relative weight of each section of the talk.

STEP 4 Think of ways of catching the listeners' interest: examples, anecdotes, impressive statistics, interesting quotations.

STEP 5 It is useful to 'rough-draft' visual aids at this stage, because they can help you make the sequence of points more clear and logical. Think about whether some information should be put into handouts.

STEP 6 Check overall length, and the relative weight of sections. A little too short is better than even a little too long. As a rough guide, allow about one minute for every 100 words, plus time if necessary for changing transparencies. One A4 page, double-spaced, takes about 3 minutes of speaking time.

STEP 7 Finish preparation of visual aids. If you are using PowerPoint data projection, slides on transparency are a useful back-up in case of last-minute technical problems.

STEP 8 Prepare handouts, if you want them. Make copies.

STEP 9 Plan the exact words you will use for the opening, the transition points, and the conclusion. Practise them again and again. If you are anxious, write on cards the introductory and concluding sentences. Make more notes if you need them (see Checklist 2).

STEP 10 REHEARSE your presentation, as often as necessary. Do not omit this step! You can practise alone, or ask a friend or colleagues to listen to you. With practice, you will become more fluent and at ease. Make sure you speak simply, but in academic not conversational style. Project your voice across the room. You will find this slows your speech. Check the timing carefully and make adjustments if necessary. Mark a time reference at one or two points in the presentation.

STEP 11 Think about the questions the audience may want to ask you. Plan how you will answer them.

STEP 12 On the day of your presentation, be calm and organised. If you are unfamiliar with the location, go beforehand to plan where you will stand and where you will put your papers, and to see how the projection works. Arrive in good time for your presentation. Remember to take all your visual aids, notes and papers!

If you feel nervous, do not worry. That's normal. Breathe slowly and deeply for a few minutes beforehand, and try to relax the muscles of your face, mouth and neck. This will make you look relaxed, and will improve the quality of your voice. Then remind yourself how well prepared you are, and enjoy it. Concentrate not on yourself or your notes, but on the audience and making clear to them what you have to say.

Checklist 2 USING VISUAL AIDS, HANDOUTS and NOTES

VISUAL AIDS

If you are using an **overhead projector**:

1. Before your presentation, check that the equipment works. Decide on the best place to stand, so that you do not obscure the view of the audience; decide where to put transparencies before and after use; decide whether you will point at the transparency or at the screen (or not at all)
2. If you point at the transparency, use a pen as a pointer.
3. Detach the transparencies from their backing paper to make things easier during your presentation. Interleave them with plain paper
4. Number the transparencies in case you drop them.

If you are using **PowerPoint** data projection

1. Bring your presentation on a memory stick or CD/DVD. Please do not bring it on a laptop.
 2. If possible, set up your presentation before your talk. This can take several minutes, even if all goes well.
 3. Have a blank slide at the start and end of your presentation. This makes your start and finish smooth.
 4. PowerPoint has an excellent on-line tutorial and help system. Use it when you are preparing your presentation so that you can make full use of its facilities (such as time monitoring, hand-outs and notes).
 5. Don't be tempted, because of PowerPoint's capabilities, to make your slides too 'busy'. That will distract the audience's attention.
 6. Even if you are giving your presentation in a well-equipped room, technology can go wrong. Print out your PowerPoint slides on to transparencies, so that you have an alternative.
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HANDOUTS

Handouts are useful in three ways:

1. To show data that are too detailed for a visual aid, such as transcript data from interviews, or mathematical calculations. If there is a lot of detail, the points you want to refer to in your presentation should be clearly highlighted in the handout. The handout is given immediately before the presentation, and then referred to.
2. To provide a "signposting" framework to guide the audience through your talk. In this case, the hand-out will be a note-frame, which is given out before the presentation. Don't put too much into it, or the audience will read the handout instead of listening to you.
3. To act as a record of your presentation, which the audience can take away. This could be either a note frame or a fuller text. For this 'record' type of handout, it's common practice to add your address and email address, so that people working in the same field can contact you later. Some presenters like to give out this type of handout at the end of their talk, so that the audience listens with full attention. Others give it out at the start, as a support to listening.

Keep your handout short - one page if possible.

NOTES

Visual aids often provide sufficient support for your presentation. If you feel you need notes as well, remember that they will be more to cope with during the presentation: you will have to deal with the visual aids, the notes, and the audience.

1. Cards, or A5 paper, are often recommended because they are neater in the hand than big pages. Make sure you number them clearly!
 2. A good alternative is to use photocopies of your visual aids, with notes written on them. It is then easier to coordinate your progress through notes and visual aids.
 3. Write very large and clear, with plenty space.
 4. Use colour, so that you can quickly locate key points or words
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Checklist 3 SIGNPOSTS AND LANGUAGE SIGNALS

INTRODUCING THE TALK	<i>I'd like to</i> <i>I'm going to</i> <i>I want to</i> <i>what I'd like to do</i> <i>what I'm going to do</i> <i>what I want to do</i>	<i>talk about</i> <i>discuss</i> <i>tell you about</i> <i>is to explain to you</i> <i>is to describe</i> <i>is to give an account of</i>
ORDERING POINTS (TIME ORDER)	<i>To begin with</i> <i>Second(ly)</i> <i>Finally</i>	<i>At the beginning</i> <i>Then</i> <i>Next</i> <i>After that</i> <i>At the end</i>
ORDERING POINTS (LISTING AND ADDING)	<i>First(ly)</i> <i>A second reason</i> <i>Another point</i> <i>Also</i> <i>Last(ly)</i>	<i>Second(ly)</i> <i>Third(ly)</i> <i>The third aspect</i> <i>Other factors</i> <i>In addition</i> <i>Finally</i>
STARTING A NEW SECTION	<i>Now</i> <i>Moving on to</i> <i>Turning to</i> <i>What?</i>	 <i>If we move on to</i> <i>If we turn to</i> <i>Why ...?</i> <i>How..... ?</i> <i>Which....?</i> <i>I'd like to move on to</i> <i>I'd like to turn to</i>
TRANSITION	<i>Having considered (X), let us now move on to (Y)</i> <i>So these were our methods. What about our results?</i>	
CONTRASTING	<i>But</i> <i>However</i> <i>On the other hand</i>	<i>Nevertheless</i> <i>By contrast</i>
REFERRING TO VISUAL AIDS	<i>This slide (graph, chart) shows</i> <i>Here you can see</i> <i>Here are</i> <i>This is</i>	
DEFINING	<i>By X we mean yyy</i> <i>We call X yy</i> <i>X is defined as yy,</i> <i>We can define X as yy</i>	

REPHRASING	<i>That is</i>	<i>In other words</i>	<i>To put it another way</i>
GIVING AN EXAMPLE	<i>For example, For instance, such as, say, like, including</i> <i>To give you an example, An example of this is</i> <i>Let me give you an example Here is an example</i>		
EMPHASISING	<i>actually</i>	<i>in fact</i>	<i>indeed</i>
	<i>importantly</i>	<i>surprisingly</i>	<i>interestingly</i>
	<i>it is clear that</i>	<i>clearly</i>	<i>obviously</i>
	<i>I'd like to underline</i>	<i>highlight</i>	<i>emphasise stress</i>
	<i>it's important to bear in mind</i>	<i>keep in mind</i>	<i>remember</i>
CONCLUDING A SECTION	<i>So</i>		
CONCLUDING THE TALK	<i>So Finally</i> <i>To summarise Summing up To conclude In conclusion</i> <i>I'd like to finish by saying</i> <i>I'd like to conclude now with a few remarks about</i>		

Checklist 4 NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

POSTURE

- 1 Stand straight but not stiff.
 - 2 Balance your weight evenly on both feet.
 - 3 Standing well allows your diaphragm to move more easily to control your breathing and voice production. So you feel better, sound better, and look better.
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**MOVEMENT
AND
GESTURES**

- 1 Too much movement is distracting; no movement at all is boring and uncommunicative.
 - 2 Use movements and gestures to signal transition points or to stress points of importance.
 - 3 Avoid meaningless gestures and repetitive movements. Don't wave your left hand about in circles or wave the pointer about. Use the pointer only when necessary, and with a firm movement. If you have a laser pointer, keep your hand close to your body when using it; don't hold it at arm's length like a gun.
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**FACIAL
EXPRESSION**

- 1 Your facial expression must match your message. If you claim something is interesting, look as if you find it so.
 - 2 Relax your facial muscles. If you look nervous, the audience will not be comfortable.
 - 3 In the ten minutes before you start, make sure your tongue is relaxed and not raised tensely against the roof of your mouth. If you can discreetly yawn widely once or twice, this will help to relax your facial and throat muscles and to feel less tense.
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VOICE

- 1 Speak a little louder than you think is necessary. Project your voice to the back of the room. Use your diaphragm to do this, not the muscles of your throat. Keep the muscles of your throat and mouth relaxed. Otherwise your voice loses resonance and power, and is less pleasant to listen to.
 - 2 Speak a little more slowly than you normally do, especially if you feel nervous. This will help you sound and feel more confident. A useful rule-of-thumb is: the larger the audience, the more slowly you should speak.
 - 3 Use your voice as a communication tool. Vary the speed - speak more slowly in the introduction and the conclusion. Use stress for important points and contrasts. A short silence can also serve to emphasise a point or a transition. All these techniques contribute greatly to making a presentation interesting to listen to.
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**EYE
CONTACT**

- 1 Eye contact creates a relationship between the speaker and the audience. It encourages the audience to listen. It helps to relax the speaker. So look at people.
 2. Start and end with direct eye contact, looking round the whole audience. During the talk, don't gaze over people's heads or out of the window. Look at your visual aids (and notes if you have them) as much as is necessary, but don't stare at them and talk to them. Look at the audience as much as you can.
 3. Don't look always at the same section of the audience or, even worse, at one 'victim'. Don't dart your eyes about quickly, or sweep your gaze round like a searchlight. Focus on one person or group for 1-2 seconds; then look at another person or group, then another.
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Checklist 5 ASKING and DEALING WITH QUESTIONS

ASKING QUESTIONS

GENERAL	<p>Make clear:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • that it's a question <i>I have a question</i> • what the topic is <i>....about assessment:</i> • what the point is <i>what's the balance between exams and projects?</i>
INTRODUCING A QUESTION	<p><i>I've got a question about ...</i> <i>Could I ask a question ...?</i> <i>Sorry, could I just ask ...?</i></p>
CLARIFICATION	<p><i>Sorry, I didn't follow what you said about ...?</i> <i>What did you mean when you said ...?</i> <i>Could you give me an example of ...?</i></p>
MORE INFORMATION	<p><i>I was interested in what you were saying about ...?</i> <i>Could you tell us more about ...?</i> <i>Could you expand a bit on what you were saying about ...?</i></p>
CHECKING COMPREHENSION	<p><i>So you mean ...?</i> <i>So you're saying ...?</i> <i>Can I just check I've understood – did you say...?</i> <i>Have I got this right: ...?</i></p>
RESPONDING TO ANSWERS	<p><i>Yes, I see.</i> <i>OK, thanks.</i> <i>Thanks, that's clear now.</i> <i>That's not really what I was asking. What I meant was ...?</i> <i>OK, but what I really wanted to know was ...</i> <i>Sorry, I'm still not clear about ...</i> <i>Perhaps I didn't make my question clear. What I was really asking was ...</i></p>

DEALING WITH QUESTIONS

Look through these expressions and decide which ones you think you would like to use.

ANSWERING DIRECTLY	<p><i>Well, as I understand it ...</i></p> <p><i>If I've understood X correctly, ...</i></p> <p><i>Well, according to our results ...</i></p> <p><i>OK – I think I can answer that quite simply ...</i></p>
‘PLAYING FOR TIME’	<p><i>Er, let me see ... Well, I suppose I'd say ...</i></p> <p><i>That's an interesting / a very good question! Well, ..</i></p>
HANDLING COMPLEX QUESTIONS	<p><i>Well, those are really two different questions.</i></p> <p><i>OK - let me deal with those questions one at a time. Your first question / point was about ...</i></p> <p><i>I'll deal with your second question / point first, if I may.</i></p>
DEALING WITH AWKWARD QUESTIONS	<p><i>I haven't had time to look into that, sorry.</i></p> <p><i>I really don't know / I'm not (quite) sure / I've really no idea.</i></p> <p><i>I'd need to think about that.</i></p> <p><i>I'm not absolutely sure, but I'd guess that ...</i></p> <p><i>I don't really have any experience of that, but X might like to comment?</i></p> <p><i>I don't think there's enough evidence to say for sure.</i></p> <p><i>I was just coming to that / I'll come back to that in a minute, if that's all right. I just wanted to ...</i></p> <p><i>That's rather outside my field.</i></p> <p><i>That isn't really my field, but perhaps X could say something about ...?</i></p> <p><i>That's an important question, but it's really too complex to deal with now.</i></p> <p><i>That's really a whole different argument / discussion / topic.</i></p> <p><i>There isn't really time to go into that now / here.</i></p> <p><i>I think we're going off the point a little</i></p> <p><i>Well, I think you'd be wrong to assume that ...</i></p> <p><i>You seem to be assuming that ...</i></p> <p><i>Do I take it you don't think / believe / accept ...?</i></p>
