

THAKUR COLLEGE OF SCIENCE & COMMERCE

Autonomous

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

PRESENTATIONS SKILLS

INTRODUCTION

Well-developed Presentation Skills enable you to communicate clearly, precisely and effectively in a variety of modes or registers and settings. It should be pointed out that they are rated as one of the most important soft skills. The ability of communicating with the audience and giving presentations should be seen as a mandatory prerequisite for both the effective learning process and the successful working life. Thus, it is imperative to gradually increase and enhance your presentation skills through a continuous training that will help you to become more competent, confident and competitive. The purpose of this chapter which is based on the best Western practices is to help to develop your presentation skills. It first introduces the basic premises of giving a presentation by examining in details its preparation, structure, timing, form of delivery and language, equipment and facilities, visual aids and material for distribution. The subsequent sections cover more specific topics including verbal (voice, intonation, appropriate language) and non-verbal communication (eye-contact, body language, hand gestures) communication, interacting with audience and answering questions, handling your nerves during the presentation. The chapter concludes by focusing on rehearsal activities and different forms of feedback which will enhance your presentation skills.

OBJECTIVES:

- To develop your skills to communicate clearly, effectively and confidently with a range of audiences in a range of different contexts;
- To improve your research and design skills, and strengthen your delivery techniques;
- To enhance your use of different support electronic and other visual tools;
- To reinforce your performance skills (verbal and non-verbal);
- To increase your confidence level in interacting with audience and control your nervousness;
- To promote critical and reflective thinking by dealing with feedback on your presentation skills.

DEFINITIONS

Three types of presentation might be identified:

1. **Information-giving.** This is predominantly descriptive, giving or summarising information. You may be asked to do this as part of a mini-teaching session, sharing theoretical or factual information. Here the point is to see what you have understood and how you have extracted the main facts from your reading and to relay these to the group. You will need to make decisions about what information to include.

2. **Discursive.** Here you will need to debate the strengths and limitations of an approach or develop an argument, exploring and weighing up different perspectives, challenging your audience to accept a different viewpoint. For this, you will need to decide your 'angle' – are you for or against it, weight pro and cons? Pull your audience in, challenge and confidently debate.

3. **Demonstrative.** This type of presentation tends to be used in the context of training: for example, when demonstrating your ability to illustrate your understanding of a technique or teaching a practical skill to others. (Craig, C., 2009)

Presentations are key activities and might include:

- Group and individual presentations for a given topic as part of a module assessment.
- Seminar presentations giving a paper to an academic or your peers for the purpose of teaching or showing evidence of your understanding of the topic.
- Providing an overview of some research carried out by you or your group.
- Demonstrating the use of a piece of equipment or software such as PowerPoint to show that you have developed the essential skills to use it appropriately.
- Dissertation-related presentations and Vivas to demonstrate your ability to manage a research project.
- A job interview where you have been asked to present for several minutes on a given topic.

PREPARATION

Usually, the majority feel nervous when presenting something. It is mainly due to the fact that in a live presentation there is no second chance. Plus, you should be aware that the way in which information or ideas are delivered strongly affects how they are understood by the audience. Even tiny inaccuracies in presentation can make it hard to follow. Thus, for communication to take place effectively presented information has to be received as intended by the speaker – and not misinterpreted.

Though some of you might be better suited to giving a presentation than your colleagues, actually this is not a skill which you either have or do not have at birth and anyone can be good at presentations. You can master these skills like many others, but it requires rigorous preparation, constant rehearsal, deep reflective practice and constructive feedback.

The crucial elements of any presentation are the information that you have to deliver and the audience that have to receive it. The best presentations are focused with a precise aim and the supplied information is appropriate and addresses the clear-cut, unambiguous question. Poorly prepared presentations are those which include just a bit of everything.

Thus, before you start working on the presentation, answer the following questions:

- What is the main aim of the presentation and what message you want to deliver to the audience in the time limit set?
- What is the current knowledge level of the audience and what new knowledge or awareness do you want the audience to have gained from your presentation?
- What is the most effective way to communicate this knowledge?

You should remember that planning a presentation can be even more demanding than working on a written assignment. The main challenge is to try to fit all gathered information that you usually consider relevant into the time that is allocated. Some people solve this issue by planning and writing a lengthy piece which can be later reduced to key points. The advantage of this approach is that you will be well prepared with very detailed information which you can freely use during the presentation particularly if questions are asked. Otherwise, some people compile a set of headings, and based on these headings prepare a short paragraph for each point of their presentation. This is your personal decision which approach to use, but it would be more advantageous and safer to prepare a detailed paper and then reduce rather than creating a brief set of headings and trying later to add more information. At any rate it would be propitious to have a set of notes to use as a guide during the presentation. It should be pointed out your presentation has to be brief, clear and precise, and provide backup for more complex ideas. You should remember that overloading the audience with a very detailed, scrupulous information will not automatically make your presentation better. A potentially good presentation might be weakened by packing it with excessive details and losing a sense of key ideas and conclusions you want to communicate to the audience. Thus, it would be useful to write down the aims of your presentation. Focus particularly on what new knowledge or awareness you want the audience to have gained – what will the audience know, understand, or be able to do by the end of the session that they did not know, or understand or were not able to do before?

You might plan the body of the presentation;

- prepare the first draft of the presentation;
- prepare the first set of prompts;
- put the presentation aside for a while
- review, revise and edit first draft – decide on a ‘good enough’ draft of the presentation;
- decide on the audio-visual aids that will be useful;
- prepare the ‘good enough’ set of prompts

STRUCTURE

Whether the audience can understand what you are trying to communicate will be determined by how you structure your presentation. You should focus on the development of a clear structure that will help to map out and guide you in your preparations and in your final delivery. Some authors are quite prescriptive in their approach and suggest that you should: ‘limit your thinking to the rule of three: a simple technique where you are never allowed to use more than three main points’ (Richard Hall 2007: 320). This can be helpful in focusing your ideas and ensuring that you are clear in what you are arguing. The best approach is to decide your ‘bottom line’ – the key message that you want your audience to take away – and then work backwards from this so that everything you include leads to this conclusion.

As a very general principle, the rule of three is offered.

1. Tell them what you are going to tell them.
2. Tell them.
3. Tell them what you have told them.

You need to think about how to build your presentation by dividing the material into sections, each one dealing with one important point. Structure your ideas so that you move seamlessly from one point to another. The structure of your presentation will depend on the topic that you are dealing with, but in general there should include:

- An introduction, outlining the aim of your presentation and the areas your talk will focus on
- The main body, containing the substance of your talk and developing the ideas outlined in the introduction
- A conclusion, drawing together the main points and containing the ‘take home message’ for the audience

INTRODUCTION

It is of key importance to get a good beginning. Apart from introducing yourself and subject of your presentation, you should plan carefully about what point of entry will stimulate your audience and at the same time, form a springboard into the main topics of your delivery. When thinking about your openings, keep your audience and their ‘needs’ very firmly in mind. A good beginning can make the presentation; a poor, inappropriate one can seriously undermine it. Many people tend to fail to have a proper introduction that contextualises the topic. Once the ground rules have been established, you then need to outline the main points that you will be covering during your presentation. If you can say something that catches your audience’s attention at the beginning and makes them want to hear what follows, then the presentation is likely to go well. You can be creative too. Instead of starting with a series of statements about what is coming next, you could consider stimulating more interest by posing a question, presenting a puzzle or a conundrum, showing a picture, or telling a story. Any of those devices are more likely to capture the imagination of your audience and help you create an engaged and interested atmosphere which can really set the scene for a strong and effective delivery. However, do be careful of starting with a joke; make sure that it will not cause offence and that it is not too well known. Consider any cultural considerations and sensitivities.

MAIN PRESENTATION

This will be influenced by the general context and aim of your presentation and the expected audience. You may need to decide between a big picture approach and one that selects a smaller area with more detail. As you develop your knowledge of the topic, you will feel more confident about what to include and what to exclude. Identify the key messages. Three or four main points are normally sufficient for a presentation of up to a half-hour. For a longer presentation, do not exceed seven main points in order to avoid overloading your audience. Remember, less is almost always more. You should also decide what is best covered through speech, text, images and what could be given in a handout rather than used as presentation content. Support your key ideas by choosing clarifying examples. Because it is usually difficult to follow a spoken argument, you need to make sure that it is relevant, accurate and interesting to the audience, your audience will find it easier to maintain concentration and to stay with your argument. You should choose carefully examples to provide interest and improve understanding and think where to place them in the structure of the content. Use such things as examples, stories, statistics, quotes from expert sources, or research findings.

CONCLUSION

Because of the relief of having made it through, otherwise excellent presentations often suffer from an uninspiring, hurried ending. Do not let the pace and energy of your presentation drop at the end. This is the ‘tell them what you have said’ section. You need to summarise your points, again using visual aids to reinforce them if possible. Always leave your audience with something memorable, say a powerful visual or a convincing conclusion, with a key idea, a central theme to take away and want to reflect on later. It is also good practice to thank the audience for their patience and to invite questions or discussion.

TIMING

In most presentations, it is usually better to deliver less content at a reasonable pace, than too much content at a faster pace that may leave the audience feeling overwhelmed and confused. You should fit the topic into the allotted time and plan time for breaks, asides, questions. This means you should think clearly about what to include and exclude from the final version of your presentation. Inexperienced presenters will find difficult to fit into time allocated. On the one hand they have prepared too much material and then have to jump to their conclusion, rushing over key points and running the risk of leaving their audience confused. On the other hand they have under-prepared and have to face one of the most embarrassing of all public speaking experiences – running out after ten minutes with your audience expecting the full half hour. Where the presentation timing is present, it is important that the pace of the verbal and image presentation are in a correct sequence. In five minutes, your message must be to the point with little by way of illustration. Twenty minutes, on the other hand, will enable you to make an impact both verbally and visually. Ensure that you are not trying to squeeze too much information into the allocated time. Enough is enough; no one wants to hear you rushing through the material in the hope of getting to the end. Rehearsal will help you to set realistic timing and adjust your pace of delivery to accommodate pauses and changes of voice tone for emphasis. You will then be able to edit the content, perhaps deciding what facts you need to discuss and what can be covered in the handouts or visual aids.

DELIVERY (FULL SCRIPT VERSUS NOTES)

Inexperienced presenters attempt to write down the whole speech, even including ‘Good morning ladies and gentlemen’. They prepare a closely drafted text, each line filled, with very little space left. Experienced presenters have their own style of notes, but never fill the page with text. You can organize your speech notes in many ways and it is very much a personal preference. When it comes to the actual presentation you need to decide whether you will read from what amounts to a script, or whether, based on your notes, you will speak without reading directly. Certainly, when a presentation is delivered in one of these two ways there is a noticeable difference, and in most cases the reading of a script comes across definitely less well. It depends to a certain extent on the way that you have written the script. If it is written in a formal academic tone then it will sound overformal. If you are able to write it in a more conversational style, then you will have a better chance of making it sound natural. Apart from very brief, well-chosen text, it is better not to read from a prepared text. A written text from which you need to read can stand like a literal barrier between you and your audience, but also typically when people read their voices go dead and they deliver the topic in an ill-paced monotone that has the average audience losing interest after about the second sentence. If you are marking for successful communication, then an audience must be listening to and following your presentation. You should work to become as comfortable as possible with your material in advance, so that you do not need to rely on a prepared text. Delivering your

presentation using a natural conversational style is the best way to make the most of face-to-face presentations, and is much more likely to result in a performance that everyone will evaluate positively. Try do not pack too much into your notes – they are, and must always be, a distillation of your preparation, not a script of all that you have prepared. Your notes must support, not distract you. There will be times when you may need a fuller script and these short notes will not be enough, especially if you have to give a paper. Again, do not clutter up your page. Remember to put in some markers when you can pause and paragraph breaks. Many presenters use a cue card system. For each point they are to make, they write a heading, a short phrase or two, or a set of key words, on a post card, or similar, and arrange the numbered cards in the correct order to follow through the presentation. These cards might also have other reminders: ‘Refer to diagram’; Write in bold and in the centre of the card so that you do not have to peer. These are particularly useful when you have to walk about while you are presenting.

FORM OF LANGUAGE

It is important to recognise and respond to the difference between formal written language and spoken language. When giving a presentation it is not obligatory to use complicated language constructions, to use long words, or to speak in nested and convoluted sentences. If you choose to speak in a way that does not necessarily come naturally to you, or is in some way made more complicated than it needs to be, you will in all probability not communicate effectively. This does not mean that you should not use correct vocabulary, especially when dealing with technical terms, which clearly form an important element of the content. There is a case for giving an explanation, or simple definition, of technical terms as they arise for the first time, particularly if you are dealing with an area of your subject which is new to the audience. Use correct language and proofread (words used appropriately; correct spelling and punctuation). It is essential to check your work for errors. Also follow general principles: avoid gender stereotyping; avoid racist and racism stereotyping; avoid being aggressive, swearing or obscenities; use the language that can include everybody.

ENVIRONMENT (EQUIPMENT, FACILITIES)

You should find out when your presentation will take place. The danger spots are immediately before or after lunch and last thing in the afternoon when your audience may be distracted by thoughts of dinner or the journey home. During these times, the more interactive your presentation can be, the greater the chance your audience will be attentive and engaged. Another important aspect of planning concerns the location of your presentation. This can have significant implications for how you plan your content and organise yourself. Go to see the room in which you will be presenting in advance of arriving for the actual presentation. If you have access to the venue, it might help to pay an early visit. If this is possible, listen to other presenters in the same room. The aspects you might want to check include: • type and size of room • seating arrangements – fixed or movable • lighting – artificial or natural? • Acoustics • equipment available, e.g. whiteboard, projector, OHP, flip chart, tape recorder • location of power points • position of speaker (you) • facilities for special needs.

VISUAL AIDS / MATERIAL FOR DISTRIBUTION

If you use more pictures and diagrams than text, you will possibly help the audience to understand better what you are saying. This is because after three days an audience will have retained 7% of what they read (bullet points, or other notes on the screen), but 55% of what they saw pictorially (charts, pictures, diagrams). You should be aware that visual aids are complementary to the presentation and you should not focus too narrowly on visual aids because you will lose the key point of presentation.

Visual Aids can:

- Help audiences understand the presentation itself. For example, writing up the agenda of the talk on the board or as a handout will help an audience follow the structure of the presentation itself. (clarify the meaning)
- Emphasise different parts of the presentation. Here you might underscore a key word or point by capturing it on a PowerPoint slide, by giving a supporting quote or reference or by producing an illustrative image or object. (visual aids reinforce what you say)
- Take the pressure off the speaker. For a brief while all eyes are on something else for a moment. This is a good thing. (people tend to look at the visual aid rather at you, it helps when you are nervous)

When you think about what makes presentations effective, it will be convenient to consider how you can use images to communicate more effectively. It will be useful to remember these general principles:

- Use images to improve understanding. Sometimes, it is easier to use a picture instead of words to improve audience understanding. When you show a picture, you can ask them a question or suggest they think about the image in a certain way. You can then remain silent while they think about the image or the task you have set them. Images can also be used to direct audience attention away from you and onto the image on the screen. This may help to steady your nerves as it gives you a few seconds to perhaps take some deep breaths or check your notes.
- Use images to save time. If there is only a short amount of time you could include images as a quick way to cover some of the content. You have probably heard of the phrase, 'a picture paints a thousand words' and this is very relevant to a student presentation.
- Use images for interest. Images use the visual sense whereas sound and speech use the auditory sense. Providing content in a variety of formats means that the audience has to use of a range of senses. This keeps them active in the process of receiving the presentation. We all have preferences and using a variety of communication approaches ensures a wider appeal to different members of the audience.
- Use images for impact. Images are more relevant for some topics than others but even if only a few can be included, they can be useful to create pauses and breaks in the delivery, generate discussion themes or make a lasting impression.

Tips for PowerPoint Presentations:

1. Avoid clutter slides at all costs
2. Select a clear font such as Arial or Helvetica.
3. Use bold rather than underline and avoid italics;

4. A dark background (deep blue or black) and light coloured text (white or yellow) for contrast will make your words stand out (Use of colour that detracts from the main content of the slide, or that makes reading the text difficult.)
5. Use a font size of 20 or over: use a 36 point for titles and a 28 point for body text
6. Spelling and /or grammar mistakes
7. Use pictures and icons and beware of the special effects, e.g. spinning words or sound effects
8. Keep the presentation consistent, e.g. background and style. Do not suddenly switch fonts half way through. You may not notice but your audience will
9. Less than 30 words per slide, 5–6 words for headings a maximum of five bullet points per slide
10. Keep the number of slides down to one per minute or even one per 40 seconds

HANDOUT MATERIAL

Sometimes you will be expected to produce a handout of some kind. Handouts can be taken away as a reminder of what you said. Handouts can have details that might clutter up your presentations. Handouts distributed at the end can be a good way of concluding, but you need to tell people at the beginning that you are going to do this, otherwise they can feel annoyed if they have taken careful notes which the handout makes superfluous.

You need to consider the style and content of handout material, as well as the purpose. Some options are:

- Main points/headings.
- Notes generated by the presentation software that you have used. Possibly an edited version of a long presentation would be a good idea.
- Headings/main points, with space to write notes.
- Diagrams.
- Charts.
- Statistics.
- References.

Avoid giving handouts while you speak. The distribution of handouts while you are talking distracts people, and you will lose your audience. It does not matter how often you say of a handout ‘don’t read this now’ – the temptation to look at it immediately seems universally irresistible.

VERBAL (VOICE, INTONATION, APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE)

However, it is not possible to use images for everything in your presentation. But be aware that up to 38% of what is taken in by those present is through the spoken word, which highlights the clear need for what you say to be audible and very much to the point. You should remember that your voice is an incredible tool. On average 7% of what the audience understand comes from the words that are used within the verbal interactions, compared with 38% of information resulting in tone of voice and 55% being dependent on non-verbal cues. Use this to your advantage. Presentations are

greatly enhanced by varying the tone of voice to emphasize aspects of the content. Make sure you project your voice to the back of the room. Try to vary the tone of your voice and the speed or pace of delivery to give emphasis to different parts of what you say. Use silence to your advantage. A short pause can give emphasis to a point you are making. One of the ways in which inexperienced presenters betray their lack of skill is that they fade in volume. They may begin their talk with reasonable audibility but this decreases as they forget to project their voices in accordance with the size of the audience (the more bodies, the more the sound is absorbed) and the acoustics of the room. Good projection should not be a matter of straining but of being aware of where the voice is going, and making effective use of breathing to support the voice. Presenters who fail to project are usually too busy peering at their notes and being worried by what is coming next. Another concern for those giving presentations is that of speaking too quickly. When speaking to an audience of any size it is advisable to speak more slowly than your normal speed, and to leave pauses occasionally. Speaking more slowly and pausing is even more important if you want the audience to pay attention to words, diagrams or pictures on a screen at the same time. Speaking slowly is not the same as speaking hesitantly, and although being nervous might lead to hesitation, it is a good idea to work towards eliminating this. Be enthusiastic about what you have to say. If you fail to show any interest, there is little chance that your audience will be attentive and engaged. Nothing is as boring as a monotonous voice reciting a presentation that has obviously been memorised and delivered on many occasions or, even worse, reading from notes. To keep your presentation alive there needs to be an element of spontaneity. This can be achieved by varying the pitch and tone of your voice in relation to the subject matter. Speeding up your delivery is another technique that will keep the audience's attention. Sometimes this is followed by a moment of silence (just for effect) and then a calmer, more measured approach follows. Experiment with this during your rehearsal to ensure that you do not come over as being a little manic.

NON-VERBAL (EYE-CONTACT, BODY LANGUAGE, HAND GESTURES)

Eye Contact. Eyes are one of your best tools for involving the audience in what you are saying. Good posture, movement and gestures will be of little use if you fail to support them with appropriate eye contact. Great presenters understand that eye contact is critical to building trust, credibility, and rapport. Far too many have a habit of looking at everything but the audience. One way of spotting inexperienced presenters is to see how they focus on a small group, usually in front of them and usually those giving off positive expressions of interest or encouragement. This focusing has the effect of rather embarrassing those people while, at the same time, losing contact with others in the audience. Those who started with rather negative feelings towards the speaker will be unlikely to have such feelings ameliorated if they are never looked at, seemingly never included in the occasion. It is advisable to maintain eye contact with your audience at least 90% of the time. It is appropriate to glance at your notes or slides from time to time, but only as a reminder of where to go next. You are speaking for the benefit of your audience. Speak to them, not the slides.

If you are an inexperienced presenter, you might find it very difficult to look any member of the audience in the eye. A useful technique is to try to focus between and slightly above the eyes; the audience will feel that they are being looked at and involved, unless you are extremely close. The size of the audience will determine the appropriate level of eye contact but here are two important guidelines to follow, regardless of audience size.

- Never hold one person's gaze for more than five seconds maximum.

- Never appear to be ‘watching tennis’, swinging your eyes (and head) from one side of the audience to the other.

Body Language. You will also need to think how you communicate using body language. Body language can distract people from what you are saying or even irritate. People can bite their nails, twiddle with things, sniff and so on. If you have distracting habits, find a way of controlling them. Hold your hands behind your back or hold a sheet of paper so you can’t fiddle. Body language can encourage people to listen to what you are saying. This things can engage other people: smiling (it is appropriate to smile but not like a Cheshire cat); leaning towards them; standing up to do a presentation (it gives your authorities and helps project your voice); moving in a natural way (standing totally still is distracting). Hand gestures and facial expressions can be used to your advantage to emphasise particular points. However, treat these with caution because inappropriate gestures can also interfere with your presentation and detract from what you say. The way that you stand will have a huge impact on the way that you breathe. The way that you breathe will have a huge impact on how you sound. Think about whether you will be sitting or standing during the presentation and which will be most appropriate for the event. Avoid standing frozen like a statue, try not to pace about like a caged animal, but aim to move naturally and appropriately.

Gestures.

Using your hands can help in the same way that whole body movements can: to relax, stimulate and illustrate. If you find it hard to use your hands naturally, then the best policy is to hold them by your sides. Try not to:

- clasp hands behind the back. This looks much too formal.
- fold them in front. This is usually interpreted as a very defensive posture.
- keep them stuck in your pockets throughout the presentation. This can look either casual or nervous.
- scratch, poke or stroke yourself. As you have probably observed, this is quite a common nervous reaction amongst stressed presenters.
- wring your hands together. This can look dishonest or slightly peculiar.
- fiddle with keys, pens, pencils, coins, lucky charms, worry beads, etc. You will just look nervous.

INTERACTING WITH AUDIENCE AND MANAGING QUESTIONS

While developing presentation skills, you can tend to focus on yourself as the speaker and forget about the audience. This is a mistake. You should be interactive. If you begin positively and catch the audience’s attention by establishing a rapport, you are more likely to keep it. You should stand up straight and speak directly to your audience, making eye contact and smiling, though not inanely. If you can do this, you will let them know that you are confident and you have something to say that is worth listening to. Ask the audience questions and give them an activity (make a list; vote on something) Check if they understood and see if they need something to clarify. Make sure that you include everybody. Have an attention-grabbing opening and other statement. Check with them that you are on the right lines: ‘Was that point clear?’, ‘Can you all see this slide?’, ‘Am I going too fast? Do not be afraid to admit that you had not thought of a particular angle if someone springs a surprise question on you, but rather use it as an opportunity to stimulate further discussion You may have heard advice about making a joke, and the use of humour in general, and this can work

very much to a presenter's advantage in some situations. If you want to start discussion: ask people to discuss in 2s or 3s for a minute, then share with the group; make discussion points or activities clear; have a prepared list of question to ask them.

HANDLING QUESTIONS

If you provide time at the end and stimulate a question-and-answer session sometime during your presentation it can really help you to ensure that you cover or clarify areas that you simply did not know required clarification. If it is a formal meeting, always check with the organizer before you start your presentation about the ground rules for questions, and any time limits you need to be aware of. If members of your audience ask you questions, then it means that they have found something of interest, something to challenge or a point that requires further expansion. The interactive time during a presentation is often the most animated, intellectually stimulating and engaging part of the experience. However, too many speakers make little or no effort to prepare themselves for questions. This is dangerous, because the inexperienced presenter can flounder here. As you prepare your material, take into consideration probable. The longer and more complex the presentation the more your audience may appreciate the chance of asking you questions at certain intervals rather than having to wait until the end. However, until you are fairly experienced, and feel confident that you can handle questions during your talk, it is safer to take substantive questions at the end. Otherwise, you risk being completely side-tracked from your main argument or disconcerted by challenges to what you are saying before you have completed your presentation. Make it clear at the beginning that during your presentation you will deal only with requests for clarification and that there will be time for questions at the end. Be sure to announce that there will time for one/two more questions and stick to that limit. When you do accept a question, your listening skills will be important. It is hard to listen carefully when you are nervous, particularly if someone is asking a complex multiple question. If this happens, write down the key parts of the question, otherwise it is easy to answer the first part and forget all the rest. If you are at all uncertain what the question means, clarify this with the questioner. You should be aware that people ask questions for many reasons. There will be some who are trying to make an impression on the audience or they may simply like being the centre of attention. Where questions are clearly being asked in the questioner's personal interest, it is simplest to thank them for raising their point, agree with as much of the point as you can, perhaps suggest a discussion outside the meeting and move on to the next question. If questions reveal a genuine weakness in your presentation, it is usually better to accept this and ask for suggestions from the questioner and the audience for ways around the difficulty. You may find that someone can suggest a way forward. If, however, the difficulty seems to you to be much less significant than the questioner is suggesting, you will need to make sure that the audience does not end up devaluing the bulk of what you have said. If you do receive a rude, hostile or discourteous question that appears to be an attack on you, then do try and stay calm. The audience will be very much on your side if you can stay calm and not be provoked. It is very tempting to retaliate and bite back. This will play directly into the hands of the questioner. Stay calm and respond on the lines of: 'I think it is best for us to discuss this later'. 'You're fully entitled to your opinion.

HANDLING NERVES

Many people get nervous when they speak in front of others. Having nerves is good as this gets the adrenaline flowing and keeps you alert and on top of the subject. You may find that you are nervous at the beginning of the talk until you get into the swing of it and then you are fine. This is very

common. There are several things that can help considerably: get as much practice as you can; concentrate on exposing yourself to similar situations; practise deliberate relaxation; and prepare for each specific presentation. During your preparation it is worth considering how you will handle your own anxieties and nerves. For example, you can memorize the first paragraph. If you are aware of the symptoms of your anxiety you may be able to act to limit their effects. For example, if your hands shake, avoid holding notes in your hand; if your mouth dries up, have a bottle of water to hand; if having a roomful of people looking at you directly makes you feel uncomfortable, begin with an interesting visual aid which will attract the focus of the audience; if you fear that your mind may go 'blank' have your notes available and be sure that they are easy to navigate – in a large, easy to read font, or highlighted in a bright colour, for example. Finding what are often quite simple ways of controlling the symptoms of nervousness is likely to help you to feel less nervous. If you are over-nervous, find the least threatening situations first – talking to a small group before addressing the audience, getting used to the room before giving a paper at a conference. But do it. Each time you will feel less nervous. Be positive about yourself. Avoid apologizing for yourself. An overly apologetic presenter does not inspire confidence, and if those in the audience have no confidence in you, there is a tendency for them not to listen attentively. You need to remain confident, at least on the outside, and to present in an interesting and lively way. Remember that you do know what you are talking about because you are very well prepared. You probably know more about the topic of your presentation than the audience, even, in some cases, more than the tutor. Your best weapon against nerves is the knowledge that you have done everything possible to prepare for the event, that you have carefully researched your subject and audience, your talk (or poster) is well structured and your notes are well organised, your visual aids well-chosen and you have at your fingertips supporting evidence and examples.

REHEARSAL

The more you prepare you more you are likely to succeed. And knowing that you have prepared will reduce your nerves. It is suggested that for every minute you are on your feet when presenting you will need an hour's preparation. That may sound excessive but, if you think about it – the searching through sources; making notes; preparing your slides; rehearsing the talk; checking on the length; selecting your quotes; and double checking your facts and figures – you can see that the ratio is not so absurd. Once you have prepared a presentation you must rehearse. Not to rehearse is not an option. It might seem tedious to have to practise, but it really pays to rehearse several times in advance. You will need at least one full-scale, real-time rehearsal to check timing, use of aids and flow of arguments – or responses to likely questions. Ideally, find colleagues or friends to act as an audience and ask them to give you feedback afterwards. If this is impossible, then, for a formal presentation, tape yourself and replay the tape after a decent interval, listening critically and noting points where you need to change something.

The need for rehearsing diminishes slightly as you gain experience, but it remains vital so that:

- You can confidently move away from your notes on stage and make eye contact with an audience rather than having to be glued to your text.
- You can keep to time – and the shorter the time for your presentation, the more you need to rehearse to ensure that every one of those precious ten minutes is used to best effect; please don't try to just read your paper very quickly and face the chair's axe halfway through. For such short speeches, learn the whole thing but keep your notes handy as back-up.

Remember when practising, though, that it is often difficult to replicate the conditions that you will be facing on the day of the presentation.

REHEARSAL CHECKLIST

- Rehearse and learn the factual content and structure so that they are very familiar to you. Make sure that you understand the wider context of the topic so that you will be able to handle questions effectively.
- Rehearse speaking aloud so that you can hear the sound level, pitch and emphasis you need to use in your voice. This will help you to use pauses confidently and prevent you from rushing in to fill the silences that do occur naturally in presentations.
- Rehearse in front of a mirror or video camera so that you can see how members of the audience will see you. This may cause you to change the way that you use your hands or how you hold your notes or cards. Using a mirror or video is a technique used by many actors and professional communicators and can improve your performance considerably.
- Time the rehearsals so that you can edit your content to fit the time available. You may be penalized for taking longer than the time given or you may be told to stop when the allotted time is up, regardless of how little of the content you have covered. Rehearsal should help you to be realistic about what you can reasonably be expected to cover and what content could be given in a handout.
- Rehearse as part of the group to make sure that it sounds like one complete presentation rather than a set of individual parts with some duplication. Group rehearsal will also help to prevent the presentation overrunning for the reasons we have outlined above.
- Rehearse using the technology to improve your skills and confidence levels. This will also help you to be time efficient. Using the technology should not delay your progress but improve the overall quality. This rehearsal will also help you to be aware of how much movement is needed to operate the technology.
- Rehearse in the physical environment if this is possible. Practice in using tables, lecterns or chairs will be a real help for the actual event.

FEEDBACK

Presentation Skills require much feedback and the preparation for next presentation should be based on feedback from the last. You should remember that for communication to take place, information has to flow in two directions – that is, the ‘receiver’ picks up the message from the ‘sender’ and confirms receipt by giving some form of recognizable feedback – even if it is no more than a gesture (a grunt seldom qualifies as good feedback). Without real feedback you cannot be certain that communication has in fact taken place. You may need to take into account several different kinds of evaluation for your feedback during and after your presentation. These can include:

Formal evaluation – Completed marking criteria sheets and any other written/verbal feedback from tutors, lecturers, and/or peers (other students). Request additional feedback or clarification if necessary (from tutors, lecturers, other students and audience members). Incorporate appropriate suggestions next time you present
Informal evaluation – People’s body language; Comments made during or after the presentation; Interaction between yourself and audience members, and the kinds of questions that are asked.
Self-evaluation – Think about your presentation. What worked? What

did not work? One very important form of feedback is that of self-reflection, so try and do some reflection and analysis after you have given your presentation. Have a look at those notes you made for that presentation and, while the memories are fresh, write down a few thoughts as to what, if anything, might have been done differently, what extra visual aids might have been used, what examples could have been introduced. Make a note of also what went well and what can be reinforced if you were to give the presentation again.