DARE LEARNING

Top Tips

Presentations

What is a presentation?

A presentation may be as informal as a team briefing or a short training session, or it may be a major conference address. However, all presentations share some common factors, and you can use a similar approach when preparing for any of these.

Before you start

Before starting work on your presentation, ask yourself a few questions:

- **Why** am I doing this presentation?
- **What's** it's purpose?
- **Who's** it for?
- **What** will they want or expect?
- **How** am I going to deliver it?
- **Where** will it take place?
- **When** will I deliver it?

All the answers to these will affect your preparation in some way.

Why am I doing this; what's its purpose?

- Is the point of your presentation to inform, such as a new product launch? Stress key differences from the existing product and the advantages of this.
- Is it to announce changes, such as to a system or procedure? Include the reasons and need for change.
- What do you want to happen as a result of the presentation? Emphasise the action you want and by when you want it.
- Is it to entertain, to inspire, to appeal, to rebuke, to reward, to persuade, to provoke? This will affect your style – light hearted, passionate, stern, etc, the words you choose to use, and the examples you include.

Who's it for?

- Who is your audience - colleagues, managers, customers, new recruits? Each group is likely to have a different need and level of knowledge.
- How well do you know your audience? If very well, you may want to include a few stories of shared experiences, or 'in' jokes.
- How much do they already know about the subject? This will affect your starting point – start from something they are familiar with.
- What are they expecting to hear, and what will be their attitude to it, and their likely response? You may need to plan for an uphill struggle, or alternatively a welcoming response.

When, where, and how will I deliver it?

- What time of day is it scheduled for? First thing, or just after lunch? Attention spans are lower and shorter after lunch – do you need to make your presentation more involving or active?
- Are you familiar with the room and equipment you intend to use? A large group in a large room will not see detail on your visual aids.
- Do you want audience involvement and participation? If so, make sure you plan and allow plenty of time for it.

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Material

Your aim at this point is to collect or create more than enough material to use, so that you have plenty in reserve to use for ad-libs, or to answer unexpected questions. It is a three-step process:

- **Create** - seeking and collecting existing material or creating it
- **Cluster** – gathering it into related areas
- **Compose** – putting it into order within the clusters, and putting the clusters into a logical sequence.

Two useful methods here are mind mapping and brainstorming.

Mind mapping starts with a blank sheet of paper; write down the central theme in one or two words and around it the topics that support it, joined by lines where links exist. Around each topic, write the points that support it, again joined by lines as needed. This will give you the structure and content of your presentation as a collection of bullet points.

Brainstorming is less diagrammatic, and consists of writing down all your thoughts as they occur to you, without attempting to filter or order them.

A third method combines both of these. Write down the ideas in one or two words as they occur to you on post-it notes. Stick these on a large piece of paper, and when you have run out of ideas, move them into groups of related ideas. The advantage of this is that you can keep moving and re-grouping your ideas until you reach an arrangement you like.

You may find it useful to classify each idea as one of:

- **Must** - essential main items that have to be included.
- **Should** –detail; items you ought to get in to support your 'musts'
- **Could** – examples and anecdotes to bring in or leave out as needed

Structure

Your presentation will fall naturally into three main parts:

- **Beginning** – your introduction – similar to the news headlines
- **Middle** – the main body of your presentations
- **End** – the summary, to reinforce your message, a call for action

The beginning is your introduction. Include who you are, what you're going to talk about, and why. You may want to start with a dramatic opening, or an attention-grabbing question, so script this out in full.

In the middle create a sub-structure, bringing in your points in a logical sequence. One useful structure to use or adapt is:

- **Position** - 'For the last two years we have been doing…..' Start from a point your listeners will be familiar with.
- **Problem** – 'This has resulted in excessive costs and heavy losses on…..' You may be moving on to new ground here.
- **Possibilities** - 'We have three alternatives. These are….' Where you give several alternatives, include the pros and cons of each.
- **Proposal** – 'So what I suggest we do is…..'. Stress your recommendation for action, and invite support.

Build your sequence logically, go from:

- **Known** to **unknown**
- **Simple** to **complex**

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- **General** to **particular**
- **Practical** to **theory**

At the end, plan a brief summary, to reinforce your recommendation without going over all the points again, and ask for the action you want.

Notes

Consider also how you will assemble your notes. Three alternatives are:

Full script

You won't need to remember any of your script, but it can come across as stilted, and leaves no scope for questions or to cover a point raised. It can be useful if someone else is relying on key words or phrases to change visual aids for you.

Brief notes

Best where you know your subject reasonably well, this consists of sheets of comprehensive notes. Include key phrases in bold print, reminders of when to ask a question, notes of what to write or draw on the flipchart or what slide to show, and key timings at different points.

Headings

This may be just a series of one-word headings and reminders, for where you are very familiar with the subject. This may be on A4 paper, or if you intend to stand up or move about, use a number of postcards with one idea per card, to flip over as you progress. Whichever you use, don't forget to number the pages and fix them together in case you drop them! This is flexible enough to allow for audience input, questions, etc.

Visual aids

This refers to any item you invite the audience to look at, and will generally refer to something intended to support your presentation by making your point more clearly. Some of the more common ones and tips on using them include:

Flipchart

- Pre-draw complicated diagrams etc
- Use strong dark colours like blue and black, and red for highlights
- Use diagrams; a graph tells a better story than numbers

Handouts

- Use to reinforce and expand points raised in the session
- Can be a manual, a leaflet, a company document etc

PowerPoint

- Beware the use of coloured or patterned background – they can obscure your text. Check that it can be read or even seen.
- Use a sans serif font such as Arial for clarity and visibility, and avoid serif fonts such as Times New Roman
- Don't have too many or too wordy bullet points – a good rule is six words per line, six lines per slide
- Make sure the lights can be turned off or dimmed to avoid washing out your presentation
- Don't rely totally on your slides; bring them to life by talking round them not through them. What will you do if the equipment fails?

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Rehearsal

When you've got this all assembled, the key thing that will make the difference is to rehearse. This will help you to check the timing, identify awkward words or phrases, decide where you need to include visual aids, and generally give you confidence. It will also be useful to have someone observe you and give you feedback, so that you can amend your presentation before you 'go live'.

Having prepared your presentation, what next?

Some of the presentations you will deliver will be small and relatively informal, such as a briefing to your own team. Below are some hints and tips to help you get the most from your presentation:

- Gaining impact from your introduction and summary
- Using your visual aids
- Voice quality and projection
- Audience contact, questions and interaction

Introduction

The introduction is the part most likely to be remembered so make the most of it!

- If necessary, make links with the previous speaker or their topic
- You may have prepared a dramatic opening statement or question such as
  - *'The margin we made during last month doesn't even cover the cost of our wages!'*
  - *'How much time do you waste on administration each day?'*
- Start with this before you introduce your topic or yourself. Include:
  - Who you are – your name, your role, your experience
  - What you're going to talk about - a brief summary in advance
  - Why you are the best person to do this – your involvement
  - How long you will take – manage their expectations
- Involve your audience by using 'you' and 'we' rather than 'I'.
- Make it clear whether you want questions at any time or at the end.
- Humour can help settle the audience and get them on your side.

Summary

The summary is the other part that will be remembered, give it impact!

- Give a brief summary to act as a reminder
- Reinforce your recommendation
- Ask for the action or result you want:
  - *'What I'd like you all to do when you return to work is…..'.*
- Invite questions if you've not already done so
- Thank your audience for their time.

Visual aids

If you have prepared some visual aids to support your presentation, make sure you get the most from them:

Flipchart
- If you ask for ideas from your audience, capture them here
- Write large so that everyone can see it
- If you have untidy writing, consider asking someone else to do this
- Make pencil notes in the margin of ideas you wish to capture

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- Use post-its or tear and fold back corners to mark pages for later
- Talk to the people not the flipchart - stop while you write
- Have spare pens and pad in case either run out
- Tear off sheets you want to refer to and blue-tac them to the wall

Handouts
- Consider the best point in the presentation to issue it – usually the end

PowerPoint
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- Use a sans serif font such as Arial for clarity and visibility, and avoid serif fonts such as Times New Roman.
- Don't have too many or too wordy bullet points – a good rule is six words per line, six lines per slide
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Your delivery

Voice quality and projection
- The voice you use will need to differ between talking to one person and a group, and from a small to a large group:
- Check the volume you need to use to make sure everyone can hear
- The people themselves will absorb sound compared with an empty room
- Use a slower pace for a larger group – this may affect your timing
- Exaggerate the expression in your voice for a larger group
- Vary your volume, pace and expression to give variety
- You may need to speak more clearly than usual

Body language

Make eye contact
- Look at everyone in the room, in order to assess interest, understanding and agreement, and to see if a break is needed:
- Ensure an even spread; don't concentrate on nor ignore anyone
- Hold the person's gaze for three or four seconds before moving on

Keep control of your hands:
- Use big and visible gestures wherever you would naturally
- Waving your arms around excessively is distracting
- One hand in a pocket is generally acceptable, two is not.
- Avoid jingling coins or keys, take them from your pockets beforehand

Maintain an assertive posture:
- Where appropriate stand rather than sitting; it will help your breathing
- To appear less formal, sit on the edge of a table from time to time
- To add emphasis, stand and move forward a pace or two
- Stand straight and tall but not absolutely rigid, don't slump or hunch
- Some movement is natural and desirable, but don't pace up and down

Breathe deeply:
- Good posture will help with this
- Aim to have a good flow of air in and sound out
- Avoid constricting ties or belts that will inhibit deep breathing

Prepare yourself

Immediately before the presentation, help yourself by
- Taking a few really deep breaths
- Working your jaw to release tension
- Doing a few stretching exercise to loosen up
- Not eating a large meal or drinking too much
- Visiting the toilet – even if you think you don't need to!

Verbal punctuation
- Avoid 'ums' and 'errs', your audience will count them instead of concentrating on your message.
- Beware also of other repeated phrases such as 'right', 'basically', and 'OK'; ask someone to monitor this for you during your rehearsal.
- Smile wherever appropriate to give 'visual punctuation' between parts of your presentation, but don't overdo this.

Audience contact, questions and interaction

During your presentation, you may want to invite questions or involve the audience in some other way.

- If no questions are raised, stop at a convenient point and ask for them, but if none are forthcoming move on without labouring the point.
- Try to involve as many of the senses as are possible; mainly hearing and sight but consider touch and even smell and taste where relevant.
- If you pass round a handout or an object to examine, your audience will be distracted and not pay attention while this is happening. Wait for them to tune in again before you continue.
- For a large group, send the handout round both ways to speed up distribution, or have two or more similar objects for them to examine.
- Where appropriate, ask questions of your audience. Be prepared to wait for the answer.
- Record answers as a list on the flipchart where necessary.
- If relevant, invite feedback afterwards:
  > 'Did that tell you what you wanted to know?'
- You can also invite feedback during the presentation:
  > 'Is this the kind of thing you're looking for?'

You may want to have prepared a contingency plan in case your audience says 'no'! It gives you the opportunity, if the audience is less enthusiastic, to check why this is.

Finally, if you know you have a particular strength in this area, play to it, as this will give you confidence. This in turn will come through in what you say and how you act, which will help your audience believe in you, which will give you confidence… It's an ascending spiral.

For related topics see Top Tips:
- ➜ **Body Language**
- ➜ **Communication**
- ➜ **Influencing**
- ➜ **Personal Impact**
- ➜ **Presentation Preparation**
- ➜ **Training Sessions**