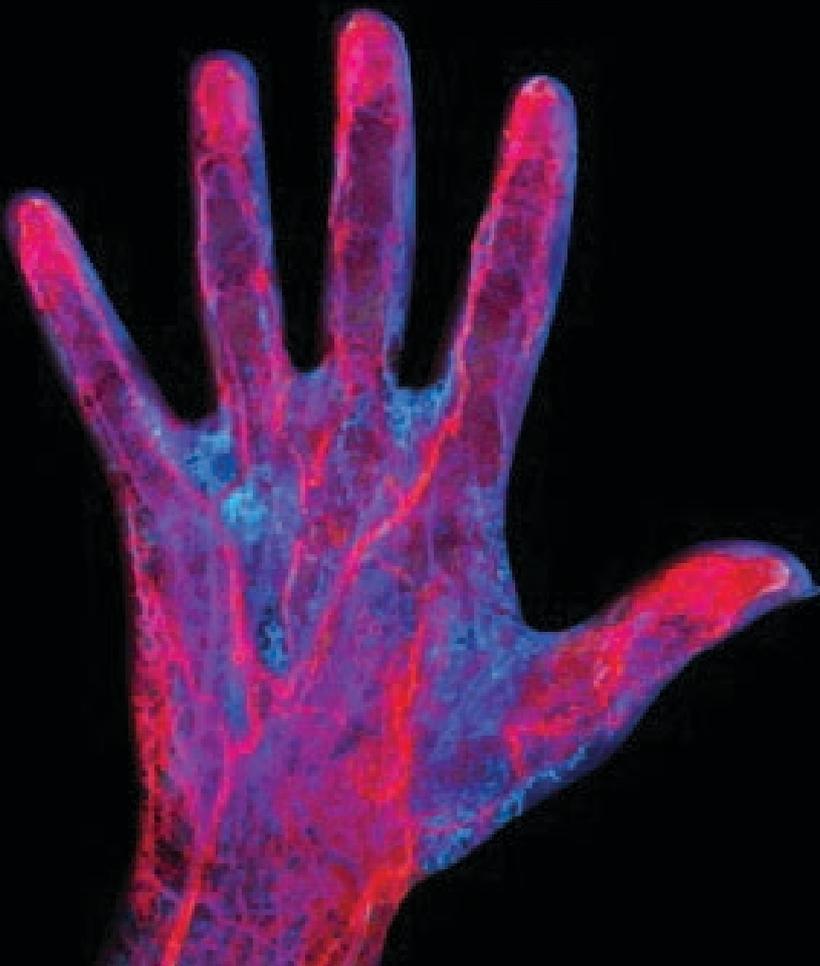


Getting your  
point across.

An academic  
guide to giving  
presentations



Talks, or what are more formally called oral presentations, are an integral part of academic and professional life. Some people become anxious about having to give a talk, but there is nothing mysterious about being an effective speaker.

A good talk involves careful planning and preparation. This resource helps you to understand what tutors are looking for and how you might plan and deliver a talk at any stage in your academic and professional life, individually or as part of a team.

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# 1. Why give a talk?

Being able to give a good and clear presentation to a public audience is a skill that you and your future employer will value greatly in a wide range of situations. Presentation skills, alongside writing and research skills, teamwork, and time management, are key transferable skills, which will have relevance to your future career in whatever field that may be. Prospective employers expect reference to these key skills in references, and short presentations are increasingly used as part of an interview process. So, when you are asked to give a talk, think about how to develop the skills involved in doing this – not just about the topic you will be talking about.

## 1.1 How do you currently feel about giving a talk?

In this section you are asked to reflect upon your attitude towards communicating orally in formal academic settings. Which of the following statements are true for you?

		YES/NO
A	I prefer to write rather than to talk about my subject, because I have had more practice at writing and can do it in my own time.	
B	Being able to express myself clearly in speech will help me think clearly, and vice versa.	
C	If I know I have to talk about something, I will definitely do some preparation, because I don't want to stand in front of others with nothing to say.	
D	If I am interested in and knowledgeable about something, I find it easier to talk about it.	
E	Explaining things to other people helps me understand them better myself.	

People have different strengths when it comes to writing and speaking. You may be very happy just getting on with written assignments, or you may be glad to prepare a talk because you find that you are much better at explaining things aloud than you are at writing them down. Whatever your particular preferences, research shows that speaking to others about concepts and information helps you learn – it helps you grow in familiarity with the language of your subject discipline, which in turn helps you increase your knowledge, understanding and skills in that area in the future.

## 1.2 Drawing on your own experiences

Thinking about what it has been like for you to be in the audience for a talk should help you consider what works well and not so well. Consider the numerous talks, lessons and lectures you have listened to during your life and:

List some characteristics of the talks you enjoyed:

List some characteristics of the talks that bored you:

When you give a presentation what do you think are your strong and weak points?

Try to keep these characteristics in mind when planning your own talk.

## 2. Planning a talk

Giving an effective talk is largely about thinking ahead and thorough preparation. If you have been asked to give a talk, check that you have been given the following information:

### **The date, time and length of the talk**

Knowing the length of time you have to speak for (usually a minimum and maximum) will enable you to select the right amount of material for the talk. You may be worrying about not having enough to say, but remember that a common mistake is to select too much material and to try to cram it all in. This usually ends up with audience members being overwhelmed with too much information that they cannot follow.

### **How many people will be in the audience, and where the talk will take place**

Decisions about things like visual aids and use of supporting handouts will depend in part upon knowing how many people will be in the audience. Whether certain pieces of equipment will be available, such as a computer and projector for PowerPoint, speakers for any sound clips, a DVD player, whiteboard etc., will also make a considerable difference to your options for the presentation.

### **What your topic will be, or the area from which you must choose a topic, and how to research it effectively**

Being clear about what you are meant to speak about is a priority. An excellently delivered, clear and entertaining talk will still receive poor marks if it fails to address the topic you were expected to cover.

You will also be expected to use evidence to support what you have to say in exactly the same way that this is essential for a written assignment. You will need to use the same research skills that you require for an essay or project, as well as reference this evidence accurately. Check the *Making the case* academic guide on research skills and the *Acknowledging knowledge* guide for help with these aspects of your talk.

You will also need to construct an argument and train of thought so that your talk hangs together with a logical shape and makes sense to your audience. Your talk should have a clear introduction, argument with supporting evidence and conclusion. Refer to the *Hammering the prose* guide on writing effectively and the *Posing the question* guide on planning for advice on how to do this.

### How your talk will be assessed

The more detail you have about the assessment criteria used for the talk, the clearer you will be about what is expected. For example, what proportion of the mark will be given for the style and delivery of your talk, and what proportion for your research and content?

### 2.1 Where to Start

Remind yourself that giving a talk is **not** the same as writing an essay that you then read out. Simply reading a prewritten essay out aloud will sound wooden and stilted. This sort of presentation gives the audience little chance to take notes, and ensures there is little or no eye contact between the presenter and the audience. Reading aloud from a script will result in poor marks for the ‘communication skills’ aspect of any marking scheme. So, writing an essay and then reading it is not an option.

A talk is about communicating with a particular audience by talking to them, just as you would talk to a group of friends, but with more formality and structure. Indeed, free speech around a subject is much more interesting than anything that might be read out. It does not matter about the odd ‘um’ or ‘err’ – that is perfectly natural. As long as you are well prepared you should be able to talk freely around the subject with confidence.

That is not to say that you should not use any notes. The use of prompt cards or bullet points on PowerPoint slides helps to keep you focused on the key points, and the structure of the talk. Showing these bullet points on slides or handouts also helps the audience to follow your talk, take notes more easily, and remember the key points afterwards.

To help with the preparation of your talk, use the following activity to check what needs to be done and to monitor your progress.

### 2.2 Twelve preparation tasks

	TO DO	DOING NOW	DONE
In the weeks or days before the talk			
1 <b>Decide on a title</b> for your talk (even if a rough idea at this stage)			
2 <b>Research the topic</b> , so that you know enough about its background to feel confident with your particular angle on it. See the guide “Making the case” for more on this. Remember, you will still need to reference any sources, facts, figures you use just as you would in an essay.			

	TO DO	DOING NOW	DONE
In the weeks or days before the talk			
3 <b>Refine and narrow the topic</b> so that you have a few main points or headings (usually between three and seven, depending on the length of the talk – a common structure is 3 x 3; 3 main points with 3 sub-points) on which you can elaborate, together with supporting evidence for your argument or train of thought. Make sure that your talk has a clear beginning, middle and end.			
4 <b>Write brief notes</b> onto ‘prompt cards’ to help make sure that you cover the ground you intend to, and in the right order.			
5 Look carefully at the <b>assessment criteria</b> to be used by the tutor (particularly if your talk is to be formally assessed).			
6 <b>Check out the venue for the talk</b> and making sure that you know where you will want to stand or sit, where you will want your audience to be, and what equipment you may want to use to enhance the talk.			
7 Decide on the <b>visual aids</b> you will use, and prepare these (see section on this topic below).			
8 <b>Practise</b> giving your talk and timing it – either to a friend, to a mirror or to a digital recorder (audio or video) – then editing your talk as appropriate.			
On the day of the talk			
9 <b>Re-read your prompt notes</b> and any supporting material, such as handouts you have prepared for the audience, to make sure that you are feeling familiar with your topic and that they complement each other.			
10 <b>Check that handouts and visual aids</b> are all to hand, and that the venue is appropriately set up, with any equipment needed.			

	TO DO	DOING NOW	DONE
In the weeks or days before the talk			
11 Remind yourself of the simple but <b>vital rules for effective oral communication:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce yourself</li> <li>• Smile and sound interested</li> <li>• Develop eye contact</li> <li>• Tell the audience the structure of your talk</li> <li>• Use the right language <b>for your audience</b></li> <li>• Maintain right pace (i.e. not too fast)</li> <li>• Use your voice and pauses to move between points</li> <li>• Use PowerPoint notes and bullet points to move you from one point to next</li> </ul>			
12 <b>Relax, breathe deeply</b> and remember that your audience is on your side.			

### 2.3 Using visual and auditory aids

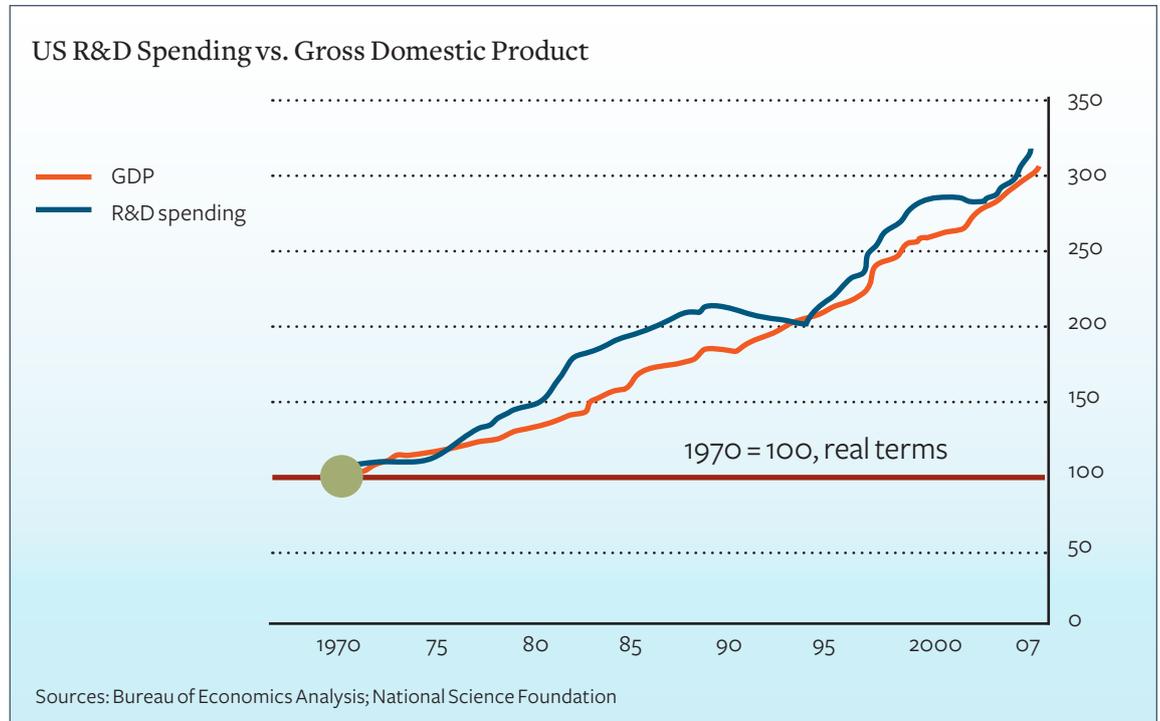
Depending on the kind of talk you are asked to give, there are numerous possibilities for visual or auditory aids. A selection is listed below, so that you can consider their feasibility for your situation. Alongside the selections is some brief advice about how to use – and not to use – these aids.

VISUAL AID	ADVICE
Whiteboard or Blackboard	Practise using these before the day to check the legibility of your handwriting and the size of writing needed. Do not write too much – just key phrases or short bullet points. You can use boards to stick up pictures or posters. Do not stand between the board and the audience, and do not talk to the board. If your audience is large, those at the back may not be able to see this visual aid.
Posters	These can be very effective but will need to be well designed and planned beforehand. Do not cram too much into a poster – space between text and pictures is very important if the poster is to have impact, and if it is to communicate clearly.

VISUAL AID	ADVICE
Handouts	Keep these short (no more than 2 sides of A4) and use bullet points or other short sections of text, illustrated where appropriate. Do not write an essay on a handout: use it to summarise and note key elements of information such as technical terms, quotations and references.
Quiz sheets or audience polls	A few questions to facilitate audience participation and to reinforce key points can be useful as a warm up or concluding activity (if time permits). Make sure the questions are relevant and interesting. Polling the audience as to their views on the topic at the beginning and again at the end of your presentation can also be an effective way of engaging them.
PowerPoint Slides and Projector	<p>Used correctly, PowerPoint can really enhance a presentation. Avoid filling slides with text. Just try to use key points, and remember to use a large font so that everybody can read it.</p> <p>If you are using a number of slides try to use a clicker so that you can change slides at your own pace without having to stand by the computer.</p> <p>Using large images or embedding video clips can also help capture the audience's attention and reinforce your points. Do not forget, PowerPoint can also help you to create excellent handouts to help your audience take notes.</p> <p>Projectors connected to online computers can also be used to display internet pages. Integrating sites such as Google Earth and Youtube into presentations can keep them engaging, but make sure you open the pages and download any material before the talk.</p>
Objects of interest	Using real objects as visual aids can be very effective. Using objects can be connected with the demonstration of a process.
Digital recorder, musical instruments etc.	Where appropriate the use of auditory material can be very entertaining. Make sure that you have checked and practised with any equipment you plan to use well before you start.
DVD, film, transparency slides or similar	As above, check all equipment beforehand. Do not overuse pictures or video – keep them short and strictly relevant to your argument.

The most important thing about all of these aids is that they need to be tied in with your presentation:

Visual aids are used to illustrate a point that you have made (or are about to make) in your presentation. Video and sound clips, graphs, tables of statistics, illustrations, photographs, maps etc. can all strengthen a point you are making. However, avoid using any of these without commenting on what it illustrates and contributes to your overall point. For example:



“This graph illustrates the close relationship between what the United States spends on research and development, and its overall GDP”.

## 2.4 Giving a presentation as part of a team

You may be asked to work with others to give a talk or presentation; all of the advice in the other sections should be useful for you and your team as you prepare, but bear in mind also the following tips particularly aimed at group or team presentations:

### Plan the talk together

Decide collectively how it will be structured, and who will be responsible for which part of the talk.

### Set responsibilities

Decide on who will be responsible for each element of planning – go through the list of ‘Twelve Preparation Tasks’ listed above and work out who will be responsible for what, and by when.

### Visual aids

Make sure you all know who will be preparing – and then using - each kind of visual aid, and that you can all use equipment such as the overhead projector, in case anyone has to drop out at the last minute.

### Physical layout

Before you give the talk, work out exactly where each of you is going to stand, and how you will move on from one section of the talk to the next. Introducing each other by name is a good idea – for example, you may want to say something like, “I’m now going to hand over to Rachel, who will tell you more about X, an aspect of the topic which she has been researching”.

### Practice

Practise giving the talk together beforehand – even if it is to an empty room – just to make sure that you all have the same things in mind in terms of what you are collectively saying, and how you are saying them. The more familiar and relaxed you are with each other, the more relaxed and convincing your presentation is likely to be for your audience.

### 3. Delivering the talk

It takes time and practice to become an effective and confident presenter. Read each tip or pointer below and tick the box alongside it if you are already confident that you can do this well.

		TICK
1	Speak in a lively and engaged way, so that you avoid monotonous delivery. Speak loudly enough, and with a voice that has appropriate variety of tone, and with a choice of language appropriate for that audience in that context – not too slangy, but not too formal either.	
2	Do not speak too quickly, but keep a steady pace and allow your material to ‘sink in’.	
3	Make frequent eye contact with your fellow students. Address them as your audience - not just the lecturer. Smile appropriately.	
4	If at all possible, stand up while giving your presentation. If you prefer to sit down, try not to look down too much. Choose a seat where you face your audience, rather than blend into it.	
5	At the beginning of your presentation, outline in a few words the aims of your talk. When doing a joint presentation, the first speaker should explain how the different parts will fit together. It is essential that you co-ordinate your part of the presentation with your co-presenters in advance, so that you avoid overlaps, or a presentation that appears disjointed.	
6	Distribute a prepared handout where appropriate. This handout should give a run down of your presentation, preferably numbered or in bullet points, and it should have a title. It should be structured, and easy to read and follow. A handout is NOT identical with your notes, nor an essay, but a condensation of your presentation, so do not have more than one to two A4 pages. Use illustrations only if they relate to your argument, or if you refer to them.	
7	If you use (particularly lengthy) quotations from secondary sources, print them in full on your handout, as your audience can then follow them easily. When you come to these quotations in your presentation, tell your audience they can find them on their handout.	
8	Also list on your handout all names and specific terms you mention in your presentation, particularly those that your audience may find difficult to note down without seeing them spelt out (for example, foreign names and technical terms).	
9	Concentrate on arguments or developments, rather than simple facts. What is your angle on the topic?	

		TICK
10	<p>To facilitate a subsequent discussion, you can end your presentation with a number of conclusions, or a set of questions that emerge from your research. This is particularly important when you are dealing, for example, with theoretical arguments or texts, which you may not agree with, or which you do not fully understand. Do not try to gloss over this, but use it instead as a way into discussion with your audience. For example:</p> <p>“I don’t think I fully understand what X means when s/he argues... How did you interpret this...? What do you make of...?”</p> <p>This will help to clarify matters both for you and your fellow students who may indeed have similar problems.</p>	

Do not worry if you have not ticked many or even any of the pointers. They can all be worked on and improved with practice. If you practice and follow the pointers here consistently and conscientiously, over time you should grow in confidence and ability. If you have a ‘dry run’ with your tutor or friends, you could ask them to look at certain aspects of your talk on which you would particularly like feedback.

### 3.1 Beginnings and endings

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the importance of the beginning and ending of your talk. Some public speakers say that you should structure your talk by:

‘saying what you are going to say’,  
then ‘saying it’,  
then ‘saying what you said’.

While you do not want to fall into the trap of saying everything three times, it can be very helpful to start by describing your aims for the talk, and giving the main headings to be covered. Then you work through the talk, and finish off by very briefly reminding everyone of the key headings you have covered. This way your audience knows what to expect at the start of your talk, which makes it easier to follow, and they are left with the key points at the end, which helps them to remember what you have said.

If the assessment criteria of the talk requires you to make a judgement or present an opinion on a topic, make sure that you give a clear conclusion at the end.

### 3.2 Inviting and responding to questions

Prepare beforehand for the moment when you have finished and you want to invite questions. A common awkward moment in talks is when the speaker has finished, and people do not know whether they can then ask something. Consider how you will actually conclude your talk, and how you will then ask the audience if they have any questions.

Likewise, think what you will do if you do not receive questions from your audience. You could ask one or two yourself, for example, *were you clear about...?* and so on. Or you could ask the audience specific questions with a view to determining how much they have taken in – in other words, assess the effectiveness of your presentation. Think ahead about how you will handle this.

## 4. Reflecting on and learning from your experience

Once you have completed your talk you may just want to heave a sigh of relief and forget all about it, but you will really benefit from evaluating your own performance, as well as reflecting on any feedback received from your tutor or assessor and your audience members. Also, remember that there is no such thing as a perfect presentation and there is always room for improvement.

Use the self-evaluation form on the next page, to keep a check of how you are developing your skills. You may want to use this for practice with your friends – you could fill in the sheet for each other. It is advisable to do this when practising for your team presentation.

Once completed, this checklist should serve as a valuable resource for the next occasion on which you are required to give a presentation. Make sure that it is readily accessible and use it as the starting point for your planning.

#### 4.1 Self-evaluation sheet

Name:

Date:

Unit:

Presentation topic:

PLANNED LEARNING OUTCOMES	MY STRENGTHS IN THIS AREA	THINGS TO WORK ON NEXT TIME
<p><b>Academic content</b></p> <p>Knowledge and understanding of core material</p> <p>Extent, quality and appropriateness of research</p> <p>Conceptual grasp of issues, quality of argument and ability to answer questions</p>		
<p><b>Quality of management</b></p> <p>Pacing of presentation</p> <p>Effective use of visual material e.g. PowerPoint, visual aids, handouts (as appropriate)</p> <p>Organisation and structure of material (introduction; main body; conclusion)</p>		
<p><b>Quality of communication</b></p> <p>Audibility, liveliness and clarity of presentation</p> <p>Confidence and fluency in use of English</p> <p>Appropriate use of body language (inc. eye contact)</p> <p>Responsiveness to audience and ability to answer questions</p>		
<p><b>Overall comment:</b></p>		