

Presentation skills

Presentations are common in academia and the broader workplace, so developing your presentation skills and confidence will serve you well, long-term, in a variety of contexts.

Preparing your presentation

Taking time to prepare thoroughly will help you deliver a better presentation and boost your confidence.

Know your audience and purpose

- Who's in your audience? What do they likely know already about your topic? How is it relevant to them?
- Why are you giving this presentation? How does it relate to the course's learning objectives?
- What information do you want to share with your audience, and why?

Structure your ideas

- Keep your ideas simple and place them in context (location, time, theory, etc.).
- Clearly identify a focused main argument or message, and its supporting points.
- Order these points in a unified way that will work well for your audience. Some options:
 - Chronological; tell a story
 - problem / solution
 - question / answer
 - scientific method (introduction, methods, results, discussion)
- [Use transitions](#) to help your audience follow your ideas.
- At the beginning of your presentation, help your audience see why your topic matters and how it's relevant to their interests. Offer a brief outline of your talk.
- Start your presentation with content, not personal details.
- Near the end of your presentation, summarize your main points and offer a conclusion / points for discussion. What are the takeaway messages for this audience to remember?
- Consider booking a writing appointment to get feedback on your structure.
- Anticipate questions that audience members might ask; prepare responses, including relevant visual images or statistics if appropriate.

Create slides and/or handouts

- Not all presentations benefit from including slides, but many do. Decide if yours would.
- Take accessibility into account; should you provide hard copy handouts of an outline of your talk? Check [their helpful guidelines](#) on accessible documents and slides.

- Take an inclusive perspective; avoid tokenism, but try to use images and sources that display a diversity of perspectives and contexts for knowledge.
- Use visual images when “showing” is more efficient or evocative than “telling.”
- Don’t overload your slides with text or animations. Simple is usually best.
- Suggested text size: 32 pt for titles, 24 pt for text; use a sans serif font.
- Don’t plan to read from the slides. Use the slides to emphasize key points that you plan to talk about in more detail.
- Include one concept per slide, use point form, and be concise.

Plan to engage your audience

- If possible, be enthusiastic about your topic.
- Keep your points concise and focused.
- Spark your audience’s curiosity about your topic.
- Consider using stories, analogies, metaphors, interesting statistics or concrete examples to make your points.

Practice

- Practice in front of a mirror, a friend, or a small supportive group; take a video; book a presentation practice session at SASS with a learning strategist or English as an Additional Language Coordinator.
- Practice in the same room you will present in, if possible, using the same equipment.
- Check that you stay within your time limit.
- Be aware of your body language: stand tall; eye contact with someone or back of room; smile; use purposeful movement; good volume, pace, pitch, pauses.
- Become familiar with the technology.
- Use relaxation techniques while rehearsing.
- Believe in your abilities: practice a positive attitude.
- Anticipate glitches and be ready for them.

Prepare

- Double-check the location and time of your presentation, and whether the AV equipment you need will be there.
- Print out any notes and handouts you might need well in advance. Bring a backup of your slides / email them to yourself.
- Try to get a good night’s sleep the night before.
- Bring a bottle of water and the notes, equipment, handouts, etc. that you will need.

- Dress appropriately for the context, but avoid wearing clothing that is too warm or shows sweat.
- Arrive early to check your space and equipment.

Delivering the presentation

- Be yourself—but the professional version of yourself.
- Have good posture:
 - Stand tall, and move your shoulders down and back, but avoid tensing up.
 - Breathe naturally.
 - Avoid pacing, swaying, fidgeting, or shuffling.
- Make eye contact with individuals or imaginary people at the back and sides of the room
- Smile and show sincere enthusiasm for your topic.
- Aim your voice to the back of the audience
- Vary your volume, tone of voice, and speed of speaking.
- Observe your audience: do they look bored? Confused? Interested? Vary your expression, volume or pace, ask a question, or summarize recent content to re-engage your audience.
- Remember to thank the audience, and anyone who has contributed to the success of your presentation (event organizers, funding sources, etc.).

Resources

- TED talks playlist: [how to make a great presentation](#)

Handling questions

The question and answer period after your presentation might be challenging because you will be in less control of the situation. Think of yourself as the leader of the discussion, not just someone who is responding to questions.

- Let the audience know when to ask questions (during your talk? at the end?).
- Open the Q&A using an open question format (Who has the first question? or What topic should we begin discussing?) rather than a “yes/no” question (Are there any questions?) Offer a discussion point if the audience is slow to participate.
- Listen carefully to the entire question.
- Repeat the question aloud to clarify the question and enable the audience to hear it.
- Stop and think about your response.
- Answer briefly and coherently.
- It’s much better to say “I don’t know” than to make up an inaccurate or misleading answer.

- Respond to difficult people calmly and politely; help them feel heard by briefly acknowledging their concern / point / question, and then offer to follow up with them after the question period is over.
- Thank your audience for their participation.

Seminar presentations

- A seminar usually occurs in a small class setting and is common in graduate school and some upper-year undergraduate courses. In a seminar, the group focuses deeply on a specific topic.
- The presenter should be well-versed in the topic, having researched and prepared materials, and the other members of the group should have read the assigned material and prepared questions.
- The presenter essentially takes on a teaching role for the group for this topic, and typically presents a summary and critical analysis of the assigned materials, then leads a discussion.
- It's helpful, at the beginning of the presentation, to share with the group a handout that includes key points and critical questions for group members to consider during the talk.

Evaluate your performance

Help yourself learn from a presenting experience, and improve for the next one, by reflecting on how things went. One method is to take a few minutes after your presentation is over and identify:

- **three** things that went well, and that you'd do again
- **two** things about presenting that you want to learn more about
- **one** thing you will stop doing

Increase your confidence

You may already have some strategies for increasing your confidence or reducing anxiety while presenting, and if they work well for you, keep using them. Here are some more ideas:

Change your focus

When you give a presentation, do you wonder:

- Will the audience like me? Will I have anything useful to say?
- Will I sound competent and professional?

These are common thoughts. However, if you think more about yourself than you do about your audience during your presentation, it can increase your nervousness. Think **about connecting to your audience and helping them** to learn something, rather than monitoring yourself or trying to perform perfectly. **Pay attention** to your audience as you talk. **Seek rapport** with them: make eye contact, smile, and respond or adapt to feedback.

Breathe

One anxiety-reducing strategy that seems to help many people is [using breathing exercises](#). These exercises seem most effective for people who have practiced them in advance, so try learning and practicing them well before your presentation.

Change negative thinking

As you prepare for your presentation, observe your own thinking about yourself as a presenter. Are your thoughts helpful or unhelpful?

We all have well-worn messages in our minds. Some of those messages encourage us to grow (e.g., ask deeper questions, do better, try again); some are comforting and complimentary (e.g., good job, well done, nice effort). Some messages in our heads make it hard to persist or try new things (e.g., you'll never get it, no one will hire you, you're just not good enough).

With practice, you can replace negative, undermining thoughts with encouraging, realistic thoughts, and you can then use these empowering thoughts anywhere, anytime.

How? Write or repeat positive statements about yourself that start with "I." Make your statements positive, realistic, and simple. Leave no room for self-doubt.

For example:

- "I can do this."
- "I have practiced; I'll be fine."
- "I did ok last time; I'll just do my best again."
- "I know what I am talking about."

Practice these statements often, first in situations where you already feel comfortable, and then at times when you typically feel nervous.

Presentation skills checklist

This checklist is also [available as a PDF](#).

Delivery

- The speaker **greeted** the audience warmly.
- I could **hear** the speaker.
- I could **understand** the speaker.
- The talk was delivered with **warmth and conviction**.
- The presentation seemed **practiced**.
- The speaker **involved the audience**.
- The talk included **effective examples** and illustrations.

- The speaker responded to **questions** and comments effectively and with calm courtesy.
- The speaker defined technical **terms** as needed.

Content

- The opening got my **attention**.
- The introduction **told us what to expect** from the presentation.
- The purpose of the talk was **clear**.
- The talk's structure was **logical**.
- The presentation was **well-suited to the audience**.
- The content was **interesting**.
- The speaker **summarized** the main points before finishing.
- The presenter ended **on time**.
- The talk **ended** on a strong final line or idea.

Body language

- The speaker showed **enthusiasm**.
- The speaker had **good eye contact** with the audience.
- The speaker showed no **distracting** movements or gestures.
- The speaker **smiled**.
- The speaker used **gestures** to help communicate ideas visually.

Visual aids

- The speaker used accessible and inclusive **visual aids**.
- I **could read** the material from where I was sitting.
- The visual aids got the point across in a **clear and simple way**.
- The speaker **did not block the screen** or flipchart.
- The speaker **talked to the audience** rather than to the screen or flipchart.