

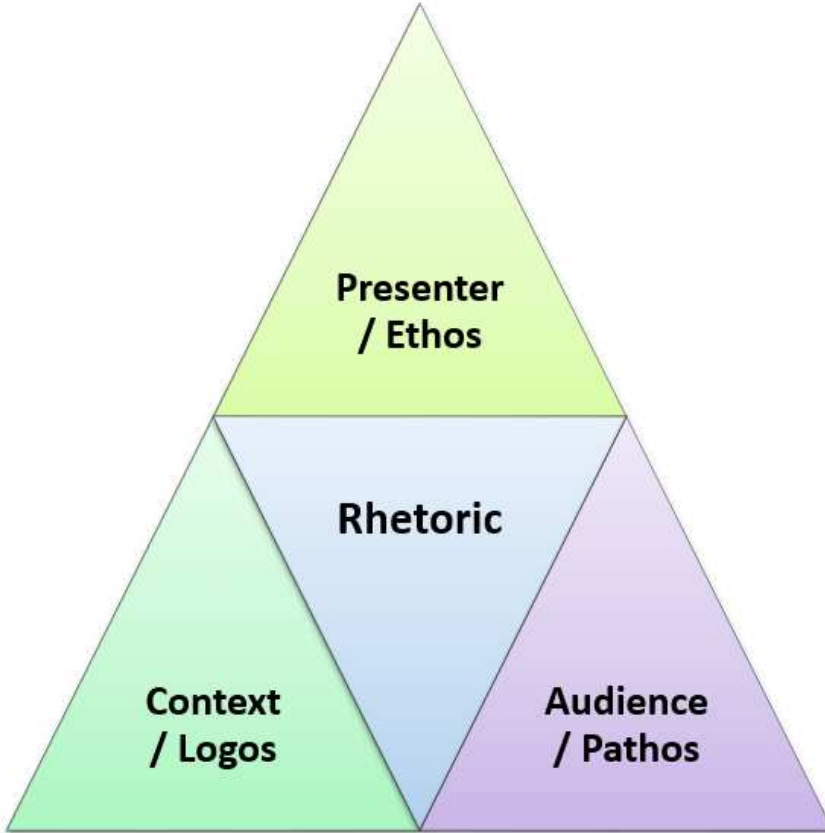
PRESENTATION SKILLS

Learning Strategies, Student Academic Success Services
Stauffer Library, 101 Union Street
Queen's University, Kingston, ON, K7L 5C4

Website: sass.queensu.ca/learningstrategies/ Email: learning.strategies@queensu.ca

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike2.5
Canada License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/ca/).

Rhetoric and the art of persuasion



Regardless of the form or reason for the presentation – a lecture, graduate seminar, undergraduate project presentation, tutorial, or job interview – all presentations attempt to persuade the audience to a particular point of view or argument, or engage the audience in a process of questioning and thinking.

Much has been written since Aristotle's influential work on rhetoric, in which he described the interrelated elements of presenter characteristics + audience connection + the content or message.

The following material will help graduate and undergraduate students prepare and deliver oral presentations, and subsequent material will assist students manage presentation anxiety.

The best speakers understand persuasion

Elements of an effective presentation use the same components as those of a persuasive argument:

- i. Logos or message - Content must be internally consistent, logical, clear, understandable, structured, and supported. This is achieved through thoughtful planning.
- ii. Ethos or credibility & characteristics of the speaker - Credibility as a speaker is established based on perceived motivations, trustworthiness, and level of expertise. These characteristics are demonstrated through one's presentation style.
- iii. Pathos or connection to the audience's emotion and values – When you tap into the emotion and imagination, as well as the intellectual curiosity of the audience, they will be more fully engaged. In addition, they will feel connected to and understood by the speaker. This occurs when the content shifts from abstract logic to tangible stories.

The best speakers tell stories.

The best stories:

- Have a plot
- Convey a central message
- Avoid sidetracks

A good story is interesting, easy to understand, and easy to remember.

The best speakers develop their skills.

Presenting is a learned skill that improves with practice and feedback.

Presentation anxiety will be reduce by doing presentations, i.e. with practice. Start in a “safe” situation (alone, then with a friend, then small group) and build up.

The mechanics of presentations



Step 1. Preparation—the Most Important step

Prepare the Opening

An engaging opening will “hook” or pull in the audience and make them more willing to listen to you. Some people suggest you have about 2-4 minutes to accomplish this! Consider using a

- surprising or provocative thought.
- shocking statistic.
- anecdote.
- clear statement regarding the relevance of your presentation to a problem they are trying to solve, or goal they are trying to reach.

Consider your audience: design your presentation around the needs of the audience.

- Become aware of the audience's prior knowledge, background, expectations.
- Ask yourself “What does my audience most need to hear from me today?”

Plan your take-home message

- What are the key points for this particular audience to remember?

Prepare the Content

The body of the presentation will include a proposition or hypothesis or purpose, the evidence or data or facts on the topic, the arguments or interpretation, and the conclusion or call to action.

The structure of a talk depends on several factors, including the purpose of the presentation, time available, the material to be covered, and the audience. Choose a structure that will result in a logical, flowing and understandable presentation.

Possible organizational formats include:

Timeline:

- A chronological story to document a process, development or series of events.

Problem/Solution:

- Frame your research as a problem to be solved
 - What was the original problem(s), and why was it important?
 - What was the solution(s)?
 - What lessons were learned, or next steps needed?

Question /Answer:

- Set up the presentation as a series of questions and answers.
- Asking and answering questions is often more engaging than passive information sharing.

Methodological Structure for scientific talks:

- Outline the flow of experiments by describing the initial problem addressed (the particular issue, why it is important), and present a series of experiments focusing on Results/Conclusions followed by final conclusions in relation to the original problem.

“Brief but bright” talk, eg the 3 Minute Thesis or 5 minute job talk. Distill your thinking around a series of WHY questions:

- WHY did you/they DO the research?
 - Describe the history of the issue, why you/they are interested in the issue, purpose of the research.
- WHY are the results SURPRISING?

- For example – the results don't support the dominant view in spite of sound methodology, an incidental finding takes on major significance, new data is produced.
- WHY are the findings IMPORTANT to the research community?
- WHY might the world CARE? E.g. What is the broader value to society, informing of policy, practical applications ...
- **Then,**
Add information around WHAT. Include sufficient detail on what you did (Method) and what you found or interpreted (Results) so that the key content you have distilled (the 4 WHYS above) are understandable.

In a very brief 3 or 5 minute presentation, it can be difficult to know how much detail to include. Draw a mind-map or brainstorm web of your content.

- The material closest to the main thesis or theme should be the focus
- Include peripheral material if it is needed to understand more central information
- The longer the talk, the more possible it is to include additional peripheral material

Seminar Presentations:

- A seminar is an opportunity for a group to focus deeply on a topic, usually through face-to-face discussion. The expectation is the leader will be knowledgeable, and the participants will have read the assigned material and possibly prepared questions.
- The seminar leader typically reviews a paper or presents a summary of the assigned material (see the suggestions for a “brief but bright” talk above) and leads a discussion.
- The seminar leader can stimulate the discussion or Q&A component by explicitly “seeding” a question at the beginning of the presentation (and telling the audience you will return to this question later for discussion), and then opening the discussion by referring back to that question and seeking audience input.

Suggestions for leading the Q&A are presented below.

Prepare the PowerPoint (or other presentation software)

- Format your slides in a way that makes sense for your presentation.
 - e.g. there's no need to follow the PowerPoint bullet point defaults
- Use a minimum 28 sans serif font, to increase readability.
- Include 1 concept per slide, don't use sentences, and remove as many words as you can.
- Do not worry about slide count
 - More slides with fewer ideas are more effective than a few long, complicated slides.
- **For complex material:** Consider using 1 comprehensive slide followed by several more focused slides and then return to initial comprehensive slide to reinforce relationships or context.
- Use visual images or graphics to make key points.
- Estimate 2 minutes per slide, excluding the title and final slides.
- Slides should not make you redundant as a speaker
 - Consider creating a handout rather than distributing a copy of the slides.

Prepare the Closing

Sum up the main points of your talk. People will only remember a couple of ideas so restate key ideas.

Challenge the audience to think more about a particular question or topic, after the presentation is finished.

Step 2. Practice

Practice is critical to delivering a coherent, understandable, interesting presentation with smooth transitions between ideas or activities. Even professional speakers practice a new presentation. Practice is the most significant way to reduce excessive anxiety.

Strategies for effective practice include:

- Speaking in front of a mirror
- Video-recording yourself
- Having someone observe you speak and give you feedback, including a Question & Answer period
- Becoming familiar with the presentation space and audio-visual system

Develop positive self-talk statements (I can do this!) and practice using them to build and maintain your confidence. See the material on Presentation Anxiety for specific suggestions.

Check you are within the time allowed for the presentation.

Step 3. Perform

Effective Delivery Skills

- BREATHE intentionally before you begin, and throughout your presentation.
- Avoid pacing, swaying, fidgeting, or shuffling.
- Stand tall.
- Make eye contact with individuals or imaginary people at back and sides of the room
- Smile to relax your face and throat, and appear interested in your audience
- Gesture with purpose
- Vary your volume, tone of voice, and speed of speaking

Calm yourself: visualize yourself as a good speaker. Use your positive self-talk statements.

Observe your audience: do they look bored? Lost? Engaged? Vary your expression, volume or pace, or ask a question or summarize recent content to re-engage your audience, as needed.

Vocal Projection Techniques

Posture

- Feet shoulder width
- Weight evenly distributed
- Knees not locked – springy
- Hands at side
- Upper body lifted (imagine a string at back of head)
- Drop /lower your shoulders

Breathing

- Breathe low in your chest
- Expand rib-cage at FRONT and BACK
- Relax/drop your shoulders

Open your throat

- Drop tongue
- Lift soft palette (like when you yawn)
- Inhale quickly on “kah” and then speak as you exhale, if you cannot produce a sound
- Relax the throat muscles

Open your mouth

- Relax the jaw by opening it slightly

- Drop the chin
- Let the sound out!

Support your body

- Feel your support low to the ground, through your feet
- Use muscle support from your butt

Lastly – adjust your volume

- Lower the pitch of your voice if you are normally soft-spoken
- Aim your voice to the back of the audience
- Increase the volume if people are straining to hear you

Leading the Q&A session

The question period is often a challenging aspect of a presentation because the speaker is in less control of the situation. Think of yourself as leading the Q&A or discussion, not simply responding to questions.

Preparing for the Q&A

- Ask: “What does my audience most need from me today?” Think ahead about people’s motivations for attending, and reflect on areas where there may be gaps in meeting their expectations.
- Anticipate questions and prepare answers (eg around substantive issues or interpretations), or re-work the content to eliminate the need for the question (eg around details).
- During your opening comments or at another appropriate time, direct the audience to consider a particular area or issue, and open the Q&A with that issue. Eg. “During the question period at the end, I am eager to hear how X aspect of my work may have application to your research”.

Responding to Questions

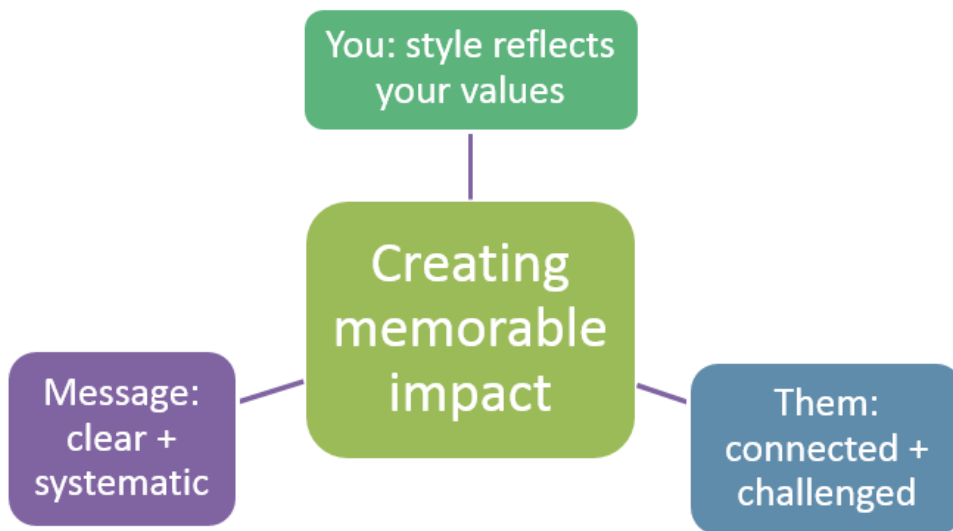
- Prepare answers to likely questions, in advance.
- Instruct audience as to when to ask questions (during? at the end?).
- Open the Q&A using an open question format (Who has the first question? or What topic should we begin discussing?) rather than a “yes/no” question (Are there any questions?) Refer to the issue you posed as a discussion point during your opening comments 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. Silence also enables the audience to think about the question or form their possible response.
- Answer briefly and coherently.

- It is acceptable to say “I don’t know”, and in some situations it is expected that the audience will push you to determine your level of understanding. Consider offering to find out what you don’t know, and respond later.
- Invite the audience to discuss difficult, controversial or interesting questions.
- Sum up the significant aspects of your talk and ideas generated through Q&A, to re-establish control of the session. Offer thanks to your audience for their participation.

The best speakers evaluate their own performance

A simple and quick self- assessment can be made, such as:

- 3 things that went well, and do again
- 2 things I want to learn more about re. presentations
- 1 thing I will STOP now



Compare your own performance to others you respect, or watch your favorite politician on YouTube and analyze her presentation style.

Check out the [local public speaking educational organization](#) on campus, or in the city, to learn more about public speaking and take advantage of resources and opportunities to practice if you wish.

When you’re next at a conference or lecture in your field, take notes on how they chose to organize the talk, what stories they told, if they used visuals or any other presentation aids – essentially use that presentation feedback handout from this document!

Presentation Skills Checklist

Speaker: _____

Evaluator: _____

Put a ✓ everywhere you agree with the statement.

Delivery	Content
<input type="radio"/> The speaker greeted the audience warmly.	<input type="radio"/> The opening got my attention.
<input type="radio"/> I could hear the speaker.	<input type="radio"/> The introduction told me what to expect from the presentation.
<input type="radio"/> I could understand the speaker.	<input type="radio"/> The purpose of the talk was clear.
<input type="radio"/> The talk was delivered with warmth and feeling.	<input type="radio"/> The talk was designed in a logical way from beginning to middle and end.
<input type="radio"/> The talk was delivered with personal conviction from both the speaker's mind and heart.	<input type="radio"/> The presentation was well-suited to the audience.
<input type="radio"/> The presentation seemed practiced.	<input type="radio"/> The content was interesting to me.
<input type="radio"/> The presenter involved the audience.	<input type="radio"/> The speaker summarized the main points before finishing.
<input type="radio"/> The speaker handled questions and comments with calm courtesy.	<input type="radio"/> The speaker let us know when the talk was over.
<input type="radio"/> The talk contained effective examples and illustrations.	<input type="radio"/> The talk ended on a strong final line or idea.
<input type="radio"/> The presenter defined technical terms and statistics for us.	<input type="radio"/> The presenter ended on time.
Body Language	Visual Aids
<input type="radio"/> The speaker stood during the presentation.	<input type="radio"/> The speaker used visual aids.
<input type="radio"/> The speaker had good eye contact with the audience.	<input type="radio"/> I could read the material from where I was sitting.
<input type="radio"/> The speaker showed no distracting movements or gestures.	<input type="radio"/> The visual aids got the point across in a clear and simple way.
<input type="radio"/> The speaker smiled.	<input type="radio"/> The speaker did not block the screen or flipchart.
<input type="radio"/> The speaker used his/her hands to help communicate ideas visually.	<input type="radio"/> The speaker talked to the audience rather than to the screen or flipchart.
<input type="radio"/> The speaker tried to use verbal focusing techniques.	<input type="radio"/> The visual aids used key words rather than sentences.