

A Guide for Oral Communication

The Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute prepared this guide for students preparing oral presentations at the capstone and graduate-levels. This guide can also be useful in both informal and formal situations in the workplace.

We suggest that you approach your presentation by concentrating on physical and verbal expression, rather than on rote memorization of a script. We advise developing your verbal agility—whether it is a group or individual effort. This process takes time and practice, so you should begin well in advance. By following the suggested steps and rehearsing, you will master the content material, you will increase your confidence and become physically and mentally comfortable with communicating it to an audience.

Four suggested steps toward developing an oral presentation:

1. Research

Become well-versed in the presentation material. Begin by doing research and discussing it frequently with someone with whom you are comfortable. This person may be a classmate, colleague, spouse, parent, or friend. You might try talking to informed people, such as professors and professionals in the field you are covering. As you educate yourself on the subject matter, make a list of questions that arise from your research. Think of these questions as a beginning point for deeper examination and understanding of your subject. Revise the questions on your list periodically and try articulating a concise response to each question. Note any questions you may not be able to answer immediately—this will lead you to do more research and become more familiar with your topic. Look over your material and pick out central points, significant concepts, and keywords or phrases that you want to communicate about your topic. If you are working with a team, hold discussion sessions. Appoint a team leader to facilitate the session.

2. Verbal Exploration

This phase can be awkward and messy, but that's okay! At this point, it's best not to write anything down and not to censor yourself. Just practice verbalizing your thoughts and ideas. Begin by composing and organizing your ideas **OUT LOUD**. Allow yourself those uncomfortable pauses and fumbles. You are talking through ideas and finding the subject in your own words.

Some tips:

- Talk through ideas out loud for two to five minutes
- You can sit or stand while practicing (whatever's comfortable).
- When you feel ready, talk to a friend or colleague **who will just listen**. Some people find it best to talk to their pet, computer, or anything that can stand in for an audience.
- When working with a team, try having each presenter speak for two to three minutes (rather than read notes, try to express your point of view on the subject matter in your own words), then field one or two questions. Repeat this cycle two or more times.
- You should avoid looking at yourself in the mirror, concentrating, instead, on your natural expression, not on your image.

This method increases spontaneity, responsiveness, and the ability to “think on your feet.”

As you practice, begin whittling down what you have to say to fit into the given time limit. You will notice that you are editing out needless digressions and verbal clutter. Shape what you have to say to capture the most significant, vivid features of your subject and what you want to convey about it. Prepare and organize an outline based on these early verbal “drafts.”

3. The W's

While practicing Step 2, consider the following questions. They are important in making choices that will help clarify the structure and core issue or over-riding purpose of a presentation. These questions serve as a checklist, which you consult continuously throughout the development and rehearsal process of an individual or team presentation. The W's emphasize aspects of tone, style, visual composition, continuity, and cogency that relate the parts to the whole and contribute to the overall effect of the presentation.

- **Who** is your audience; Will you be speaking to upper management or potential clients? The size and type of audience effects choices in content, tone, language, and style.
- **Why** are you there? Find the core argument or proof that you ultimately want to convey. Can you state this overall objective in two or three sentences? How will each team member's part contribute to building the dynamic of the whole? Who will open discussion; who will conclude it? Divide up roles according to how individual strengths, talents, and personalities generate a unified and complementary dynamic. Develop a unique group style.
- **Where** are you? Will you be presenting in a large hall or a conference room?

How will you arrange and energize the given physical space? Think in terms of the physical configuration of the space and visual flow/composition of the presentation.

- **What props/visual aids will you use?** How will you incorporate them as points of focus in the presentation so that they enhance segments and create a fluid, coherent impression. Be careful about being unnecessarily redundant or distracting. Ask yourself if you really want to display the same exact things you are saying or whether the bells and whistles you can add to the presentation are really necessary.

4. **Revising, Reshaping, and Rehearsing.**

Once you are comfortable speaking about your topic continue to pare down what you have to say so that it runs the appropriate length. Now you are the point where you, or your group, are ready for rehearsals. Begin practicing only standing up. At this stage, you are now ready to revise the outline of your presentation or write down key words on index cards for long presentations, if you want. Don't try to memorize a script (we recommend training yourself to speak without any notes for presentations that run one to five minutes). Make sure you reexamine appropriate language for the context of the presentation (audience, content, physical space). Remember to always practice out loud.

We think of rehearsing as an exploratory process where ideas are transformed into words and actions. During rehearsals problems are identified and figured out. Enjoy this process as team unity is built, the dynamics of group interaction are explored, and a fresh and energetic commitment to the subject develops out of teamwork. Use this time to experiment, shape, refine, and discover your connection to each other and the subject, not to fix it like a recording. Before running through entire presentation, work on a few minutes of each speaker's segment (as described in Step 2). Help each other become comfortable and believable. Work on transitions by repeating the "hand-off." Make changes, test out everyone's ideas, and work toward honing content, tempo, and structure. Hold a mock Q&A session to practice—make sure all members participate and that one person doesn't dominate. Then, put it all together. Hold a final technical rehearsal to work out kinks and at least two full run-throughs.

As you work on the final stage, keep in mind what people usually look for in a good presentation:

- **Vocal projection and articulation.** These depend on breathing, proper posture, pacing/rhythm of speech, and enunciation. Try practicing deep breathing by vocalizing out loud words/phrases to achieve fuller volume and clarity. This technique helps you amplify your voice and exercise facial muscles. The goal is to be easily heard and understood by everyone in the room.
- **Relaxation and Concentration.** Tension arises from emotional and psychological states, but it affects you physically. What helps you clear your head, so that mind and body are relaxed and responsive to the situation? Finding the best way to relax is uniquely individual. It is useful to ask others how they ease anxiety and test out their methods.
- **Finding Composure.** When you start practicing try not to use any physical gestures, especially hand gestures. Pay attention to any physical tension you are feeling. Try to identify what muscles and parts of your body are affected: Does your throat get dry? Do you have trouble standing still? Does your stomach get tight? Do you fuss with your hands or make fidgety movements? Experiment with ways to help you release tension. Work toward calming mind and body so that you are fully present without nervous movement—shuffling feet, pacing, wringing hands, etc. See if you can let the animation come from your voice.
- **Focus.** Focus is what directs your attention and communicates to an audience where you want them to focus. It involves the nonverbal directional signals you send to the audience. For instance, if you speak directly to one person in the audience, you draw the whole audience into that exchange. By making a well-placed gesture, you call the audience's attention to a significant point, like an exclamation mark. By crossing the room as you finish one segment of your presentation, you give the audience a transitional cue and a fresh visual angle.
- **Visual Elements.** These will be evaluated on readability and relevance. Avoid visuals that contain too much information or just look good, but don't serve any purpose. In addition, choose appropriate attire for context of presentation (Teams may consider coordinating wardrobe). The first impression you make will be your personal appearance.

When you get to step 4, you might try using the following criteria related to the physical processes of verbal expression, as well as the reception (visual/aural impressions) of presentational skills.

1. **VOICE** (Breathing; Centering; Projection)

What we look for:

- **The breath powers the voice; support breathing by grounding legs/feet and maintaining good posture.**

Strong vocal projection—Articulation clear and easily understood

Uneven vocal projection—Articulation is garbled or slurry, but distinct enough to be understood.

Weak vocal projection—Articulation is difficult to understand.

2. BODY (Relaxation; Physical tension; Eye-contact; Non-verbal communication)

What we look for:

- **Relaxation is key to physical composure and spontaneity; orient yourself to spatial environment and audience so that mind and body are present and responsive to the situation**

Speaker's physical presence is calm and projects animation and energy; direct eye-contact maintained—Non-verbal communication reinforces content

Speaker is initially self-conscious and nervous and/or avoids audience—Relaxation increases throughout—Non-verbal communication is mechanical

Speaker demonstrates extreme nervous tension throughout and/or hides from audience—Non-verbal communication is unrelated to content

3. EXPRESSION (Concentration; Focus; Point of View; Pacing)

What we look for:

- **Preparation and practice, preparation and practice, preparation and practice**

Sustained concentration and focus—Emotional/intellectual connection to content is believable; pacing and rhythm vary

Disruption to concentration and focus—Occasional loss of emotional/intellectual connection to content; speaker rushes or is monotone

Weak concentration and focus—Little emotional/intellectual connection to content; speaker rambles or pauses awkwardly

4. VISUAL COMPONENT/S (Organization; Implementation; Consistency; Continuity and Flow; Appearance; Visual Appropriateness and Relevance)

What we look for:

- **One targeted image can seal the deal**

Visuals are integrated, enlightening, and enhance content—formatting is vivid—language elements are mistake free and easily legible

Visuals correspond to content, but do not enliven it further—formatting is routine—language elements have errors, but are legible

Visuals are overused or inappropriate and detract from content—formatting is inconsistent—language elements are inappropriate or errors distract from legibility

5. OVERALL EFFECT (Integration of above categories; Connection with audience)

What we look for:

- **Experience what you are experiencing (sometimes you are “on,” sometimes “off”); Learn from the doing**

Individual

Speaker effectively engages audience and is compelling to watch and listen to

Speaker engages audience with varied success

Nervous tension impedes speaker from effectively engaging audience

Group

Group is unified, complementary, and cohesive—transitions are seamless—tone, style, and flow is dynamic and energetic

Group's unity and cohesion is uneven—transitions are clumsy—tone, style and flow are flat or inconsistent

Group lacks unity and is disorganized—transitions are sloppy—tone, style and flow has no consistency