



Managing Nervousness During Oral Presentations

Introduction

Many students dread giving oral presentations in class, yet sooner or later students in most programs will be obligated to do so. If you perspire at the mere thought of giving a seminar, or even if you are comfortable speaking in front of a group, there are ways and means to improve both the quality of your presentation skills and your comfort with them.

Although this section addresses only one aspect of presenting, many different skills are involved in a successful oral presentation, and they are all interrelated. For additional information, or for feedback and advice on maximizing your presentation skills, see the last section.

Nervousness: Causes and Cures

Some nervousness when speaking in front of a group is not only inevitable, it's also desirable. If it can be controlled, your nervousness can be translated into excitement or enthusiasm, and that makes for a presentation that is exciting and interesting to the audience. Excessive nervousness can take away any pleasure that doing the presentation may give you, but it may also have a negative effect on your performance. Learning more about the impact of nervousness is an important first step to controlling any negative effect nervousness may have on your performance or your marks.

Choosing a Topic

A good choice of topic is equally, if not more, important in an oral assignment than in a written one. Your lack of interest or enthusiasm for the topic may lead to increased anxiety about your presentation and will probably be apparent to your audience in your voice, expression, and gestures. However, if you choose a topic which is fascinating to you, it will be difficult to bore your audience. Most importantly, your involvement with the topic on an intellectual and emotional level will help to focus your attention *on the material* during the seminar, rather than on your own less than perfect presentation of it.





Preparation

Nervousness and fear of presenting can lead to a vicious cycle of procrastination. You put off working on the presentation because of fear of not doing well, yet the longer it is put off, the less time there is to prepare and rehearse. As your preparation time decreases, the pressure, stress, and nervousness associated with the presentation increase. Good time planning strategies can provide the preparation time essential for controlling nervousness. If you are confident in your knowledge of the material, and if you've planned enough time for rehearsal, you can face the presentation knowing you've prepared for a successful performance.

Rehearsal

You can manage nervousness by using effective rehearsal strategies. Your performance probably won't improve much without constructive feedback, so reading your presentation in front of a mirror has limited benefits. The better the feedback, the more quickly you'll improve, so consider using Learning Peer Helpers or your teachers, rather than your roommates or family, to provide constructive (and compassionate) criticism. Another strategy is to rehearse with equipment such as tape recorders and video cameras to allow you to review, and thus improve, your performance.

Time planning is important with presentations. You must have enough time to feel comfortable with any equipment or props you use in your presentation, and to develop your personal presentation "style" - the tone and gestures which are natural and effective for you. The more you rehearse, the more comfortable you will become with your presentation, and the less nervous you'll be.

Performance Strategies

Regardless of your preparation beforehand, some nervousness is natural and inevitable. One performance strategy is to expect and accept nervousness. Rather than trying to stop your knees from shaking, let them shake, but realize that you can go on with your presentation. Musicians, athletes, and others who perform in public employ focusing strategies to control performance jitters. If, for example, your thoughts are on your sweating palms instead of on your material and its impact on your audience, then your audience may be attending to your nervousness as well. The strategy is to focus on one aspect of your presentation (for example, conveying your commitment to natural herbicides), rather than evaluating or criticising yourself as you go. If you can occupy your own "inner critic" with something other than evaluating your performance and feeding your nervousness, then you can free your concentration and energy to accomplish what you've set out to do - demonstrate your knowledge, and educate or motivate your audience.





DEALING WITH PRESENTATION DISASTERS

Most presentation disasters are not fatal; they can be resolved comfortably if you

1. Keep smiling
 2. Know exactly what you want the decision maker to do (your main point)
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What do you do if...

The decision maker is forced to leave before you have gotten to your key points.

If you follow the old rule "Tell 'em what you are going to tell 'em, tell 'em, tell 'em what you told 'em," you won't get caught this way. Always mention your main point and major supporting points within the first few minutes of any presentation. If you are using visuals, you always have a visual that has the main point and the key points. If, however, you have made the fatal error of trying to save the "zinger" for last, and the decision maker must leave, ask for a moment to summarize (anyone will give you a moment if you ask with a smile) and state, in one sentence, the one point you want the decision maker to remember and, if you have a chance, the two concepts that best support that point.

You arrive and are told the decision maker can't attend.

Even if the decision maker can't make it, someone in the room will be responsible for reporting to him or her. Ask yourself, "what, in one sentence, do I want the reporter to say?" (What do I want the decision maker to do?). (It will not be, "He told us about" It will be a message, "we should use _____ because it is within our budget and meets our engineering requirements" for example) Then be sure you state that sentence, as you want it repeated, at the beginning and at the end of your presentation.

You find you have 15 minutes instead of the 45 you planned on.

Talking fast won't work. Decide quickly what percentage of 15 minutes each part of your presentation should take. Keep your eye on your watch and limit yourself to the





key concept in each portion. Next time, be prepared. Think about what you'll leave out if your time is halved, if you are given 5 minutes.

Someone asks a question about an issue you plan to discuss in detail later.

Answer the question briefly, and say you plan to go into detail later. If person asking the question is the decision maker, ask if the short answer is sufficient for now. Do not ask people to wait until you reach the point at which you originally planned to cover the material. If you do, everyone will focus on the unanswered question instead of listening. And, in a meeting setting, do not ask people to hold their questions until the end. Making that request suggests you are not confident enough to deal with interruptions.

You lose your train of thought mid-sentence.

Smile, say "excuse me" and start again. Keep in mind that everyone in the room has lost track of an idea at least once. People want you to succeed and are sympathetic. Keep smiling.

You plan to work through a handout page by page; people are moving ahead at their own pace.

The risk in giving people printed material is that they will read it at their own pace. If at all possible, don't provide handouts until after the presentation is over. If you must walk through a printed booklet, tell people what it contains and give them a rough idea of where different parts are located before you begin. If possible, hold your copy up as an easel and point to parts of charts or graphs. People are also more likely to stay with you if you occasionally say, "And you can see on page ___ that..." If the decision maker insists on moving ahead quickly, you'll do best to pick up the pace, perhaps skip pages, and, if necessary, focus on the pages that are important to her. (If you are going to hand out materials, don't try to bury anything at the end - like cost or fees. If people don't find what they want at the beginning, they go immediately to the end.)

You are competing for a deal and realize that the decision maker has confused you with the competition (he is taking notes on a page with the competition's name on the top).

Use the name of your firm as often as you can. Say, for example, "As we at _____ believe," and try not to focus on what he is writing.

You expect to speak to 3 people and arrive to find 20.

If you were planning to work from one set of handouts, forget it. Ask for a flipchart and pens; decide quickly how much you can rough sketch as you talk (key points, if





nothing else). Stand; it is easier to maintain control. Remember that you are the expert. Keep smiling.

You walk into the decision maker's office and are offered a seat in a deep sofa.

This is the moment to develop a bad back; ask for a hard chair. It is virtually impossible to sound confident and in control from of a cushion 6 inches off the floor.

Your throat dries out.

Do what the theater folk do. Roll a tiny piece of paper into a small ball and place it between your gum and your facial tissue in the back of your mouth. It will stimulate the flow of saliva just like the wad of cotton the dentist uses. Try this in private first, however, so you are sure you are comfortable.

Several people start a side conversation while you are speaking.

In the following order: Ask if there are questions. Ask if you can do anything to clarify. If they will not stop and you are standing, continue your presentation but try to move nearer to them. Lower your voice or pause. Hope that someone else will stop them. When all else fails, try to acknowledge that things are out of control and ask the group whether a new meeting should be scheduled.

You want to make professional overheads but all you have is a word processor and a copying machine.

If your copying machine will enlarge, you are in good shape. Type your text, in bold, on a page. Turn the page sideways in the copying machine (so the text is horizontal rather than vertical on the page, and enlarge the text.) As an alternative, consider doing the acetates by hand if you can print clearly.

You drop your overheads on the floor.

Make a joke about your clumsiness, pick them up and take a few moments to put them in order. (Now is the time to be grateful you have numbered them.)

You come prepared with overheads to find you have a podium in the middle of a long conference table and someone else is assigned to handle the overheads.

Say politely that you would rather handle your own acetates and you don't like being confined. Ask briefly if you can present from the end of the table. (Keep smiling.) If the answer is "NO" set up a hand cuing system with the overhead operator and, if at all possible, rehearse. The moral of the story is, ask about arrangements in advance.



