

Tips for Oral Presentations

At some point you will be asked to give an oral presentation. As with most subjects, the Internet is full of advice on how to make a strong presentation and give an effective speech. Not all of that advice is good, though, especially when it comes from hucksters and attention-seekers. For strong academic presentations, tips listed below will stand the test of time. They will help you produce and deliver a strong presentation.

Plan and practice first

Don't bet on your ability to wing it. Your mind will be preoccupied with the immediate experience of speaking to an audience, which means it probably won't come up with brilliant observations on the spot. Plan your remarks instead by writing them out just as you would say them in an everyday conversation. Practice out loud. Practice again, and practice one more time.

Use simple language

Aside from situations where a specific technical vocabulary is expected, speak to your audience in regular everyday speech. Use words you know. Academic presentations are different from grand political speeches, so avoid the temptation to elevate your phrases and terms in a soaring oratorical style. Choose words that are easy to understand, and limit the length of your sentences to what you can say in one breath.

Relax your belly and talk slowly

When a speaker gets nervous, they tend to tighten up their stomach and talk by pushing from their throat instead of from their lungs. That makes airflow more difficult. When airflow is difficult, the speaker works harder, talks faster, and breathes more heavily. The trick here is to keep the belly relaxed. Doing so will encourage you to take a breath between sentences, talk more slowly, and settle in comfortably to your spoken words.

Look at your audience and show some poise

When giving a presentation, act like the floor is yours. Your audience needs to see that you understand it's your time to talk. Look them in the eye, kindly, and have confidence that what you are saying is worth their attention. They want to hear you talk with a sense of purpose. While it's possible to over-perform confidence, it is more typical in undergraduate classrooms that the student-presenter should dial it up a little bit instead of down.

A few um's and uh's are okay but too many are distracting

Part of everyday speaking is searching for the next phrase, and many speakers fill that searching time with filler words such as *um* and *uh*. Your presentation can involve some of this searching, especially if parts of your remarks are extemporaneous. Still, guard against saying these filler words too many times, as the repetition will distract your audience. The same principle applies to any of the common hedging words such as *basically*, *right*, *just*, *y'know*, and *sort of*.

Speaking to an audience can be fun

There is no universal law that requires undergraduate speakers to fear the oral presentation. If you have something you're interested in, it can be really fun to share that with an audience. The pleasure of public speaking comes when you have something to give an audience and you see them buy into it. Consider how rewarding it can be when you see audience members responding to your words and visibly interested in what you're saying.

Be smart about those visual aids

See our guide document called "Tips for PowerPoint Slides."