Best Practices in Presentation Skills

Whether you are someone who actively avoids or seeks out opportunities to speak to an audience, effective presentation skills are essential for success. Presentation skills, and communication skills more broadly, are required across many disciplines in academia. These skills are important for outperforming your colleagues in job interviews, delivering meaningful lectures to a class, or presenting clear and concise research talks to your colleagues. This Best Practices aims to offer strategies and suggestions for developing and improving effective presentation skills.

What does an effective presentation look like?

Two broad categories contribute to the success of an effective presentation:

1) be prepared; and
2) be a strong messenger.

Be prepared

Know your audience

When you plan to deliver a presentation, your first task should be to find out who your audience will be. Knowing your audience will help you make decisions about the content, presentation style, and level of audience engagement for your upcoming presentation.

- **What are the needs of your audience?** Are they looking for detailed information about a specific topic or a general overview of a concept (e.g., Dolan, 2017; Novak & Clark, 2002)?
- **How knowledgeable is your audience** (Dolan, 2017; Shepherd, 2006)? Are you presenting a lecture to first year students or are you presenting a research talk to colleagues in your field? The level of the content you are presenting should match the audience’s level of knowledge.
- **What are the demographics of your audience** (Dolan, 2017; Shepherd, 2006)? Are you presenting to a group of twenty individuals or are you presenting to a group of three-hundred individuals?

Practice

Practicing a presentation is crucial to ensuring you deliver an effective presentation. This is not to say you should have your presentation memorized, but you should feel comfortable with the material. Some presentations have strict time constraints, so it can be helpful to **time yourself when you practice** to ensure your presentation length is appropriate.

To practice your presentation, try to move beyond sitting at your desk scrolling through your slides. For example, you could **practice by standing in front of your mirror or video recording yourself**. By doing this, you are not only practicing but you are also able to see if you are using any body language that may be distracting to your audience. Practicing by yourself is different than delivering a presentation to a group of people, so wherever possible you should also practice in front of your peers. Your peers can provide you with feedback and suggestions to improve, helping you feel more confident in advance of your presentation.
Be a strong messenger

Reducing Anxiety

It is very common to feel anxious or nervous before you deliver a presentation (Dolan, 2017). Though this Best Practices does not suggest you imagine the audience in only their underwear, it does have a few other suggestions to help mitigate your feelings of nervousness.

To reduce anxiety, be prepared. If you are prepared for your presentation, your confidence in delivering an effective presentation will increase, and your nervous feelings will decrease (Dolan, 2017). For example, one way to prepare for your presentation is to visit the location of your presentation ahead of time to understand the layout of the room and the technology that is accessible to you.

Another way to reduce anxiety is to practice, practice, and practice! The more comfortable you are with your presentation, the less anxious you will feel (Collins, 2004; Dolan, 2017).

There is also research to suggest that if you visualize your success, this will reduce anxiety. For example, while practicing, think about how good you will feel when you finish delivering your presentation (Collins, 2004; Dolan, 2017). Before your presentation, rather than saying “I am nervous for my presentation, try saying “I am excited for my presentation.” By changing the word “nervous” to “excited,” research has supported that individuals demonstrate improved performance in public speaking (Brooks, 2014). Above all, before you present, take a deep breath; you can do this!

Knowledgeable

To establish credibility with your audience, it is important to be knowledgeable about the material you are presenting (Bartsch & Cobern, 2003). As such, read the material until you feel comfortable and informed enough to deliver a presentation. If you are prepared for your presentation, you are likely knowledgeable. Oftentimes, you know more about the content you are presenting than your audience does.

Genuine

To be genuine is to be authentic. By being your true, authentic self, you are better able to establish rapport with your audience (Bartsch & Cobern, 2003). You may demonstrate genuineness by being passionate and enthusiastic about the material you are presenting (Bartsch & Cobern, 2003). If the presentation topic is not something you are passionate about, try to explore the topic until you do find something that interests you. There may also be times when it is appropriate to disclose a personal experience. Try to think about these personal stories before your presentation. If you can integrate a story from your own experience that is related to the material, your audience may remember and understand the material more, allowing the audience to connect with you on a more personal level.

Likeable

Related to being genuine is to be likeable. Research has shown that presenters are more likeable when they smile, make eye contact with their audience, and have an informal, conversational style of speaking, and are perceived as unlikeable when they are unfriendly, overly formal, and avoid eye contact with their audience (Bartsch & Cobern, 2003; Gelula, 1997).

Make eye contact with your entire audience rather than on one or two individuals, so you can make your entire audience feel included. To do this, choose one individual in the room and speak to that person
for a few seconds, and move on to another person for a few seconds, continuing the pattern. This eye contact will establish a personal connection with your audience. You can practice this when you are practicing your presentation in front of peers.

To speak informally, **speak to your audience as if you are having a conversation with them** rather than speaking to them in language you would use to write an academic paper. For example, in a presentation, a formal way to present the agenda would include saying “The following presentation will proceed as follows: Part one will include...Part two will present...Part three will conclude.” Alternatively, an informal way to present the agenda would include saying “Today, I am going to talk about three main points; the first one is...the second one is...and I will finish today by talking about....” The more comfortable you are with the information you are presenting, the easier it will be for you to speak informally.

By being a likeable presenter, your audience may find you more relatable and approachable, contributing to the success of your presentation.

**Body Language**

Body language can be a great resource for delivering an effective presentation, but it can also hinder your presentation via distractions. This is crucial to remember because a distracted audience will lose sight of the messages you are conveying in your presentation. Even the ways in which you use your feet and hands can affect the success of your presentation (Dolan, 2017).

**Feet**

It is important to stand firmly and confidently rather than swaying your body when you are delivering your presentation. This is because swaying may distract your audience. Having said this, you should move around when it is appropriate; for example, you may walk to the other side of the room during a transition or if an audience member asks a question (Dolan, 2007; Gelula, 1997). It is also important that you are standing where your entire audience can see you, and where you can see your entire audience. If you have audiovisual aids or a PowerPoint, be sure that you are not standing in front of your slides and blocking your audiences’ view (Dolan, 2017).

**Hands**

When you are presenting, there are instances where hand gestures are appropriate to support the information you are trying to convey. There are also instances, however, where hand gestures become distracting to the audience (Dolan, 2017). It is generally best to avoid fiddling with your hair, face, or clothes while presenting as this can be distracting to an audience (Dolan, 2017).

If you video record yourself or practice in front of peers, you will have a better idea of your how your body language affects your audience. By being aware of your own movements, you can ensure your body language becomes a supportive tool rather than a distraction to your audience. Finding a balance between gestures that are supportive and those that are distractive is up to you as an individual. Remember, be your authentic self!

**Verbal Delivery**

Like body language, your verbal delivery can also affect the success of your presentation. When you are speaking to your audience, your volume, pace, and expressiveness is imperative to convey your material in a clear way (Dolan, 2017; Novak & Clark, 2002).
**Volume and pace**

Ensure that you are speaking at a volume that your entire audience can hear. Modify your volume as needed depending on the size of your room and audience and always ask the audience if they can hear you. There may be instances where a microphone is most appropriate to reach your audience. If you do choose to use a microphone, be cognizant that when you turn your head to look at your slides, your audience may not be able to hear you (Shepherd, 2006).

It is also important that you do not speak too fast (Dolan, 2017). If you are speaking too fast, your words may be jumbled, making it difficult for the audience to comprehend the material you are conveying. If pace is something that you struggle with, taking a sip of water or moving around the room in between transitions may help you slow down.

**Expression**

Avoid speaking in monotone when you deliver a presentation. Monotone speaking will increase the risk that your audience will daydream, preventing them from understanding the messages you are conveying during your presentation (Novak & Clark, 2002). Adding voice inflection and expression will keep your audiences’ attention and can help drive home the message that you are trying to convey (Dolan, 2017; Gelula, 1997; Novake & Clark, 2002).

To adjust your vocal expression, try reading a sentence aloud and emphasize different words in the sentence each time. By doing this, you should hear different meanings to the sentence, which will help you become more aware of how your inflection and expression can affect your presentation.

**Take-home message**

Everyone is unique, particularly in their nature and style of speaking and presenting. This *Best Practices* does not aim to change your authentic self, but only to provide suggestions to improve your communication and presentation style. Incorporate these suggestions and recommendations into your presentations to the extent that you are comfortable. Practicing any of these suggestions will improve your presentation style. Above all else, these suggestions integrated with your authentic self will ensure you deliver an effective and memorable presentation.
Work Cited


Novak, D., & Clark, B. (2002). How to give an effective presentation; or, please take the mike out of your mouth. The Serials Librarian, 42(3-4), 311-314.