



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

PREPARING AN ORAL PRESENTATION

This handout focuses on steps in the process of preparing an oral presentation. You may also want to consult other Learning Centre handouts listed at the end of this handout.

Step 1: Clarify Assignment Instructions

As with any assignment, one of the most important steps is to be sure you completely understand your instructor's assignment instructions. Important questions:

- How long should the presentation be?
- Are you expected to take a point of view and support that point of view or should you just give information about your topic without taking a particular position?
- Are you expected to do research and/or just use your own knowledge?
- Does your teacher have requirements about the number and type of sources you are supposed to use?
- Does your teacher have expectations about supporting visual material such as PowerPoint, graphs, maps or handouts?
- What are the teacher's criteria for a good presentation?

If you are in any doubt about any of these questions, ask your teacher until you are clear.

Step 2: Choose and Focus your Topic

You may have to choose your own topic, or your instructor may assign you a specific topic. If you can choose, choose something that interests you since speakers tend to do a better job when they speak about something they care about.

To look for topic ideas, a good starting place is your text book. Look over the topic headings in your text. Another good source of ideas is your lecture notes.

Once you've decided on or been given your topic, you probably need to focus it more. Trying to do a short presentation of 5 or 10 minutes on a general topic like global warming is a mistake. Narrow your topic so that you can explore it in some depth within your time limit. To narrow your topic, create questions about it using question words "Who", "What", "When", "Where", "Why" and "How". For example, "How does global warming threaten polar bear survival in the Canadian Arctic?"

When you have found one or a few related questions that you think are interesting, you are probably ready to begin gathering your information.

Step 3: Consider your Audience

In order to plan a really effective presentation, you need to consider the audience you are presenting to.

- How much do they already know about your topic? You don't want to just tell them a bunch of stuff they already know. Alternatively, you need to make sure your audience has the background knowledge to understand your ideas. You may need to define key terms and concepts.
- Will your audience be interested in your topic, or do you need to put a lot of effort into motivating them to listen? Do you need to change your topic or find a more interesting angle to your topic in order to engage their interest?
- How will your topic be useful for your audience? Tell them why they want to know what you are going to tell them. For example, "It's important to know about the effects of global warming in the Arctic because it shows what will happen here in the future."

Step 4: Gather Information

For most presentations, you need to do library and/or internet research. The first step is to do some general research. This may involve reading a section of your text, consulting a specialized encyclopedia in the library or skimming a book chapter on your topic. This should build your background knowledge and give you an idea of some of the sub-topics you may want to include in your presentation.

Once you've identified those sub-topics, check that there is information available about them. This involves looking for useful resources. If you have difficulty finding resources, you may need help developing your research skills. Ask at the Information Desk in the Library for help if you need it. Once you are confident there is enough information available on your topic, then you should begin to take notes on your sources. A good way is to take notes for each of the sub-topics you identified.

Step 5: Organize Ideas

Using the information you gathered, make an outline for your presentation. To do this, make notes of the main points you want to make and the specific facts, quotes or explanations you want to use to support those points. Organize your ideas into an introduction, a body and a conclusion. For more information about these parts, consult the Learning Centre handout RS8.20 Organizing your Oral Presentation.

Step 6: Prepare Notes and Visuals

Once you have decided on the ideas you want to include in your presentation and how you are going to organize it, it's time to create your presentation notes. Don't try to write out every word of your presentation and then read it or memorize it. Those strategies do not usually lead to effective presentations. The best way to prepare is to make presentation notes containing just key words and ideas. Put your notes:

- on index cards (number the cards in case they get out of order), or
- on paper.

Using notes forces you to think about the ideas as you talk. This makes your presentation much more effective than a memorized or read one.

Using visuals can be very helpful in a presentation. You can use visuals to help make your organization clear, to emphasize important points, to illustrate key points, to introduce humour and to help listeners understand you better. Overheads, handouts, PowerPoint, a white board and video are possible forms of visuals you could use. For more information about how to use these visuals effectively, consult Learning Centre handout RS8.30 Using Visuals in Oral Presentations.

Step 7: Practice, Revise and Practice, Practice, Practice!

One of the most important things you can do to make a good presentation is to do lots of practice before the actual presentation for your class and instructor. While practicing, you will find aspects of the presentation that need revision. Maybe you need to add in some more details, change the order of ideas, or come up with some added visuals. Look for ways you could revise it to make it more effective. Alter your notes as needed.

Practice repeatedly. Below is a progression of practice activities you may find useful:

- Practice speaking your presentation aloud using your notes. Watch for possible revisions.
- Once you feel comfortable with the content and organization, practice again focusing on your presentation speed. Remember that your audience needs time to think about your ideas. Don't be afraid of a few seconds of silence here and there.
- Time yourself and adjust your content to make it fit in the time limit you've been given. This is very important. If you go over-time, it may negatively impact others who come after you. You may also be marked down for it.
- Make sure you know how to pronounce specialized words in your presentation. Check the pronunciation in a dictionary or ask your teacher or a Learning Centre tutor.
- Practice again including your visual aids.

- Use audio or video equipment from the Library and tape your presentation. Review the tape and make adjustments as needed.
- Present to a real person. This could be a classmate, a tutor or even your little sister. Work on making eye contact with your audience. Do not hide behind your notes. Making eye contact with your audience is important for the effectiveness of your presentation.
- Present in the room you are going to do it in, and check that any equipment you plan to use works. Pay attention to speaking loud enough and looking around the room while you present.

Practicing many times will not only make your presentation smooth and understandable, it will also make you more confident and familiar with the information. Your confidence will help your presentation to be understandable and engaging. If you are frightened of public speaking, you may want to consult the Learning Centre handout RS8.40 Dealing with Nervousness in Oral Presentations.

Step 8: The Presentation

On your presentation day, do a last check on any equipment you need to use. Then enjoy presenting! If you feel a little nervous, remember the practicing you've done and focus on sharing your ideas with your audience instead of on your own butterflies. Tell yourself you can do it; after all your practice, you know you can!

Other Learning Centre Resources on Oral Presentations:

RS8.20	Organizing your Oral Presentation
RS8.30	Using Visuals in Oral Presentations
RS8.40	Dealing with Nervousness in Oral Presentations