

Structuring a presentation

This guide discusses practical strategies for structuring a presentation, focusing on the need to develop an argument or report through the clear, logical progression of ideas.

Other useful guides: *Planning an effective presentation*

Presentation structure

Presentations need to be very straightforward and logical. It is important that you avoid complex structures and focus on the need to explain and discuss your work clearly. An ideal structure for a presentation includes:

- a welcoming and informative introduction;
- a coherent series of main points presented in a logical sequence;
- a lucid and purposeful conclusion.

These elements are discussed below.

The introduction

The introduction is the point at which the presenter explains the content and purpose of the presentation. This is a vitally important part of your talk as you will need to gain the audience's interest and confidence. Key elements of an effective introduction include:

- a positive start: *"Good afternoon, my name is Adam and ..."* ;
- a statement of what will be discussed: *"I am going to explore ..."* ;
- a statement of the treatment to be applied to the topic (e.g. to compare, contrast, evaluate, describe): *"I will be comparing the four main principles of ..."* ;
- a statement of the outcomes of the presentation: *"I hope this will provide us with ..."* ;
- a statement of what the audience will need to do (e.g. when they can ask questions or whether or not they will need to take notes): *"I will pass round a handout that summarises my presentation before taking questions at the end."*
- You should aim to deliver your introduction confidently (wait until the audience is quiet before you start speaking) and communicate energy and enthusiasm for your topic.

Main points

The main points are the backbone of your talk. They play an important role in helping you prioritise, focus and sequence your information. When planning your presentation you should put aside your research notes and produce a list or summary of the main points that you would like to make, expressing each in a few words or a short sentence. Ask yourself: "what am I really telling them? what should they be learning here?". Your answers to these questions will help you communicate clear and effective messages to your audience.

The sequence of your main points should be directly influenced by the purpose of your presentation. For example, build an argument by moving from background information to precise points of detail, or explain a process by describing its purpose and then taking the audience through its stages sequentially. Always remember that the aim is to communicate issues in manageable sections or building blocks, helping the audience to piece their understanding together as you work through your material.

After you have identified your main points, you should embellish them with supporting information. For example, add clarity to your argument through the use of diagrams, illustrate a link between theory and practice, or substantiate your claims with appropriate data. Use the supporting information to add colour and interest to your talk, but avoid detracting from the clarity of your main points by overburdening them with too much detail.

Transitions

Transitions are the signposts that help the audience navigate their way through your presentation. They can help divide information up into sub-sections, link different aspects of your talk and show progression through your topic. Importantly, transitions draw the audience's attention to the *process* of the presentation as well as its *content*.

Examples include:

- *"I will begin by discussing ..."* ;
- *"Now that we have explored the ... I would like to move on to ..."* ;
- *"In contrast to my earlier statements concerning ..."* ;
- *"Moving away from a focus on"* ;

Transitions can also be made without speaking. Non-verbal transitions include pausing, changing a slide or other visual aid, moving to a different area of the room before resuming speaking, or making eye contact with a different group in the audience.

The Conclusion

The conclusion is an essential though frequently underdeveloped section of a presentation. This is the stage at which you can summarise the content and purpose of your talk, offer an overview of what has been achieved and make a lasting impact. Important elements of a conclusion are:

- a review of the topic and purpose of your presentation: *"In this presentation I wanted to explore ..."* ;
- a statement of the conclusions or recommendations to be drawn from your work: *"I hope to have been able to show that the effect of"* ;
- an indication of the next stages (what might be done to take this work further?): *"This does of course highlight the need for further research in the area of"* ;
- an instruction as to what happens next (questions, discussion or group work?): *"I would now like to give you the opportunity to ask questions ..."* ;
- a thank you to the audience for their attention and participation: *"That's all I have time for. Thank you very much for listening."*

As with your introduction, you should try to address the audience directly during your conclusion, consolidating the impression of a confident and useful presentation.

Summary

A presentation needs a carefully defined structure to make the most impact. This should centre on a series of identifiable main points that are supported by appropriate detail. Use transitions to link and move between points, helping your audience to understand the development of your argument. An introduction and conclusion are essential elements of your presentation. They enable you to establish a clear purpose for your talk at the start and summarise your main points before you finish speaking.

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