**A general guide to presentation skills**

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**1. Format and structure of presentations**

**1.1 Structure of presentations**

Structuring your presentation carefully is very important to keep your audience engaged and to allow you to cover the necessary material in your allotted time.

As an OU student, whatever study pathway you are following, you are likely to gain quite a lot of experience in structuring essays, which are essentially written presentations. Many essay writing skills are transferable to a presentation setting.

Like an essay, a presentation should begin with a clear **introduction**, have a main body and a concluding statement. For the Summer Series of Journal Clubs (SSJC), it might be useful to begin by describing why you were attracted to a particular news story – this may help to ‘set the scene’. Explain how you heard about/found the item – perhaps include consideration of PROMPT here.

In the **main body** of your presentation, describe your Journal Club story – give the detail the audience needs to hear to follow your arguments, but don’t overwhelm them with technical information/jargon. Where appropriate, include a simple figure to illustrate your main point and to add visual interest for your audience.

Finally, offer your **conclusions** – perhaps comment on the main strength, weakness or exciting potential of your story. You should plan to end with a positive tone and remember to leave time to thank the audience for their attention.

This structure can be distilled into the following formula:

“**say what you will say, say it, say that you’ve said it.”**

For some types of presentation, the talk is followed by a question and answer period – in SSJC, we tend to have a ‘question and answer’ approach only for level 3 students. However, you may invite questions from your peers if you wish, in any of the club events.

In SSJC, our ethos is ‘desire to learn more’ rather than ‘testing your knowledge.’ SSJC participants are there because they are interested in the contents of your presentation, not to test the extent of your knowledge!

**1.2 Use of props and visual aids**

Remember, you do not have to use props or visual aids – a presentation can be effective just from speech alone.

However – you might consider props and visual aids as ‘the icing on the cake’. Think back to when you have listened to a presentation – what made it interesting for you – and what made you ‘switch off’?

So, when providing ‘face to face’ presentations, you might use handouts or even 3D props as visual aids. These can be very effective ways to ensure that your message gets across and can be a helpful way of including additional detail, to direct your audience to further sources of information, or simply to grab your audiences’ attention.

In SSJC, you might use a whiteboard – or flip chart - to support your story – perhaps you might construct a list of key words you think are important for your reader to consider; you might write down one or two ‘take away’ points from the story. Or you might construct a simple sketch.

Alternatively, you might be able to use PowerPoint as a visual aid – and as with any visual aid - you need to think carefully about using it so that it supports your presentation, rather than detracts from it. In terms of PowerPoint presentations – or even things written on a whiteboard - we can often apply the general rule:

**”less is often more”**

So, a good ‘rule of thumb’ is to avoid using lots of slides – you’ll see that we suggest 4 as a maximum number for SSJC. In general, <10 slides should be sufficient for a 30-minute presentation.

Don’t overload each slide with information and make sure the audience will be able to read what is on there – use a sensible size for text and chose an easy to read font. Avoid too many colours, animations and bullet points.

**2. Delivering a successful presentation**

Practising your presentation in advance will give you the best chance of delivering a successful session – and by practising, we really do mean say it out loud, don’t just read what you have prepared to yourself.

When practising, check that:

* the amount of material you intend to cover fits the time you have available (think about pace)
* you are able to pronounce any unfamiliar words (remember, many specialist dictionaries provide pronunciation guides)
* you are familiar with the order of the presentation (no unexpected surprises)
* the overall structure is appropriate (a logical order, so your audience can follow your arguments)
* any visual aids fit smoothly into your presentation

**3. How to engage with your audience**

**3.1 Engage with your audience**

The points on the following pages are intended to help you think about how best to engage with your audience. In SSJC these are fellow students – and everyone present in the room is there because they share an interest in your news.

Remember that a big advantage of a live presentation is that it enables two-way communication with the audience which can bring the topic to life. How you will do this in practice is up to you; it is important to develop your own style as this is much more likely to engage the audience. But always remember that the presentation is for the audience’s benefit and not yours.

**3.2 Think about your talking speed**

It is important to try to deliver your presentation at an appropriate pace. A common mistake, often due to nerves, is to speak too quickly. One way around this is to discipline yourself to speak at a pace that feels just a little slower than you think you need to speak. This is likely to be at a pace that will sound natural and be intelligible to your audience. Practicing your presentation out loud, prior to the event, will also help.

It is important to keep to the time allocated for your presentation. Ensure that you start and finish promptly as it is likely your audience will have other demands on their time; overrunning will be perceived as being unprofessional.

**……Don’t be afraid to pause. ……**

Making use of pauses at the end of a section or the beginning of the next signals a change of topic to the audience and can give the audience time to take in information on a slide or to reflect on what you have said. A short pause can help buy you time, if you feel a little nervous and perhaps have accidentally increased your pace.

Remember too that signposting phrases at the beginning and end of sections can help orientate your listeners and will make your presentation easier to follow.

**3.3 Think about how loud you need to talk**

Of course it is essential that your audience can hear you, so check that they can if you are using a microphone, addressing a larger group, or presenting in an room with poor acoustics. A useful ‘opening’ statement can simply be along the lines of ‘Hello, my name is….. can I just check you can hear me at the back?’

You should speak at an appropriate volume during your presentation and, just as with the pace of your talk, it is likely that speaking just a little louder than you imagine you need to would be about right.

Avoid an entirely monotone delivery; varying the intonation of your voice at appropriate points can add much needed colour, emphasis and interest. You should aim to show that you are interested and engaged by your topic as this is likely to engage and interest the audience. You should appear to be appropriately enthused by your topic. Again this can sometimes be difficult to judge, but it is likely you should project a level of enthusiasm just slightly above where you think it should be.

Your aim should be to appear confident, intoned, enthused and authoritative. If you don’t seem interested in your talk, how will you convince your audience to be interested in it?

**3.4 Think about body language**

Ensure that you make eye contact with the audience during your presentation. Be aware of your body language - be mindful of how you are using your hands; it is common to see presenters show their nerves by fiddling with a ring, watch, hair, phone, notes or glasses during a presentation which can be distracting for the audience.

A very useful thing to try is to stand in front of a mirror for one of your practice talks - you might be surprised at what you learn about your delivery.

**3.5 A final tip:**

Keep a glass of water handy. If you are nervous and the resulting adrenaline rush gives you a dry mouth, you’ll be already prepared.

**4.1 Questions and answers**

In SSJC, we tend only to have a ‘question and answer’ approach only for level 3 students – our format is generally very informal – more of a *chat* *with exchange of ideas* than an *inquisition*.

However, depending on the needs of your audience, your presentation is likely to be much more engaging if your audience is actively involved in it. It is good practice to ask your audience questions and invite them to contribute to the discussion throughout. This can be a very successful technique, especially if the audience has some insight or experience in the topic you are presenting. This approach of engaging in a structured conversation with the audience requires you to have a good deal of confidence in the material you wish to convey as you cannot expect to stick to a rigid structure. You will need to think carefully as to whether or not this approach is suitable.

Think through what type of questions the audience may have and try to anticipate what answers you might give. Make sure you have understood the question being asked and don’t be afraid to ask for it to be repeated or rephrased. Take the time you need to answer the question and don’t be afraid to say that you don’t know the answer. This will happen to everyone at some point in their professional life. Avoid the temptation to try to bluff as this is unprofessional and the audience are very likely to spot this. Offer to research the answer and get back to them with the answer.

**Giving presentations can be daunting, but be inspired:**

*“Above all, don’t fear the difficult moments. The best comes from them.”*

Rita Levi-Montalcini (1909-2012) Nobel prize-winning neurobiologist, one of the scientists involved in discovery of nerve growth factor.

*“If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants”*

Sir Isaac Newton (1643–1727) Mathematician, physicist and astronomer, developed the laws of motion and universal gravitation.

*“Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less. ”*

Marie Curie (1867-1934) Nobel prize-winning physicist and chemist, known for her pioneering work on radioactivity.