
Giving presentations

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All forms of teaching, including giving a lecture or a seminar, are intended to fulfil one or more particular aims. In planning a presentation, it is helpful to begin by defining the intended aims of the presentation and associated objectives. The aims and objectives will help to determine what methods to use, and what teaching aids might be appropriate. For example, if the main aim of a presentation is to provoke thought and discussion among the audience on a controversial topic, a didactic talk in a large auditorium to a widely dispersed audience is less likely to fulfil this aim than a facilitated interactive discussion in a smaller room with seating not fixed in rows.

Communication is an essential part of clinical practice, and some psychiatrists might argue that giving a presentation is nothing more than exercising the communication skills they have developed for clinical practice. While such skills are often valuable in giving a presentation, this task has additional requirements – skills which can be developed through practice.

First steps in planning a presentation are summarised in Box 1. The duration of the presentation is particularly important to clarify initially, because this will determine what aims are realistic, and also what form the presentation might take. If

the talk is one of several consecutive presentations (for example, within a single session on a defined topic, as at some meetings of the Royal College of Psychiatrists), information is necessary about how each presentation fits into the whole session. For example, does the time allocated for each presentation include any time for questions from the audience and for discussion, and is there a panel discussion involving all presenters at the end of the session?

Defining aims and objectives

Box 2 summarises some common aims of presentations. In general, any presentation will have one of these as its main aim, with possibly one other as a subsidiary aim. The more ambitious the aims, the greater the skill and preparation required to achieve them.

In setting out to plan any presentation, it is always worth reminding oneself that, whatever the presenter's motivation might be, the presentation is for the benefit of all those listening or participating. The objectives of the presentation should be defined with the audience in mind. As with any other form of

Box 1. First steps in planning a presentation

Get information about the likely audience
(number, previous knowledge and experience of topic, etc.)

Decide on an appropriate topic

Clarify duration of presentation (including time allowed for discussion, etc.)

Box 2. Common aims for presentations

Imparting knowledge

Generating debate/discussion

Reviewing a clinical case

Practising particular skills (e.g. diagnostic, critical appraisal)

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teaching, objectives can appropriately begin with the phrase: "By the end of my presentation, I expect those in the audience to X". Examples of X might be "to be able to describe four main points about the clinical application of serum rhubarb", or "to be able to discuss the differential diagnosis and further management of this case based on the history and presenting details I have given". It is important to be as specific as possible in defining objectives. This will not only help in planning the presentation, but will also give criteria by which to evaluate the presentation's success. For the inexperienced, in particular, there is a considerable risk of being unfocussed in defining objectives, either being overly ambitious or paying too little attention to them altogether. For example, a 15-minute presentation on a research topic can expect to deal with only three or four main points. A case presentation is more likely to engage those listening if the presenter introduces discussion with a few key questions.

Structuring the presentation

Whatever the length of a presentation, it should always have beginning, a middle and an end. Put simply, the beginning should tell the audience what the presentation will be about. It is often helpful here to mention the objectives of the presentation. For example, even when giving a clinical presentation at a case conference, it helps those participating to know that the clinical team is reasonably confident of having reached a satisfactory diagnosis, but that discussion on further management would be particularly welcome. The end of the presentation will again follow from the main aim. If the presentation is intended to stimulate discussion, it might end appropriately by identifying a small number of key questions or topics for discussion. On the other hand, presentation of a recent research study might end with its three or four principal conclusions and implications summarised as brief bullet points.

Deciding on methods and appropriate aids

Ideally, these should follow from the aims and objectives of the presentation, but occasionally this process must operate in reverse. For example, a psychiatric tutor might have access to a particular teaching room and limited resources, and it may then be necessary to ask what types of presentation

can be made effectively with these resources. If you are invited to give a presentation in an unfamiliar setting, you will usually be told beforehand what resources will be available but if this is uncertain, you should clarify these details in good time to allow you to modify your presentation if necessary.

Use of audiovisual and technological aids

The audience for a presentation may fall victim to new technology when the presenter uses this inappropriately as a plaything rather than as an aid to achieving the presentation objectives most effectively. Nowadays, it is relatively easy to organise simultaneous split-screen presentations, complicated animation or multimedia effects projected directly from a computer, and so on. The presenter should bear in mind that presentation technology is much more widely used outside academic or clinical settings than within them, and may have been designed principally to meet the needs of sales executives of glossy products more than of clinicians or academics. Even simple presentation graphics software packages have a wide range of different backgrounds to apply to slides or overheads. Choosing a colourful and 'exciting' background for one's slides may make them more distinctive, but the key question remains – does this help me (as the presenter) achieve my objectives with the audience I anticipate? In most settings, slides will be most legible if they have a simple format with a plain dark background and light lettering.

Some advantages and disadvantages of three commonly used audiovisual aid methods are summarised in Box 3. Overhead transparencies are undoubtedly the least expensive and most versatile aid to presentation. Overhead projectors are relatively simple with little likely to go wrong except a light bulb needing replacement. By contrast, slide projectors are becoming increasingly sophisticated. If nobody is available to help who knows how a particular projector operates, it may require more time to set up (not to mention careful perusal of the instruction manual) than the presenter has available. Also, if you plan to 'talk to' the slides (see below), this becomes impossible without a functioning projector. Going somewhere unfamiliar to give a presentation with slides where there is unlikely to be an audiovisual technician at hand, it is therefore advisable to bring copies on paper of each slide. This is useful in any case because whenever the presenter faces the slides to remind himself of their contents, he turns away from the audience. Having 'hard' copies of the slides on paper allows the presenter to face the audience much more.

Box 3. Advantages and disadvantages of different audiovisual aids

	<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
Overheads	Simple to produce Inexpensive Considerable flexibility during presentation	Sometimes difficult to use during presentation Use of colour limited relative to slides
Slides	Simple to use during presentation Good use of colour is easy	Relatively expensive to produce Require photographic facilities
LCD projector	Presenter need only prepare file on disk Wide range of specialist effects available Some flexibility prior to presentation As easy to use as slides	Currently very expensive Technology not yet widely available Relatively complex to set up and use Greatest risk of presenter getting carried away with technology

Once a slide or LCD projector is set up, it becomes much easier to use than an overhead projector. The overhead projector can be a problem particularly in a large hall, where the speaker is expected to talk into a fixed microphone attached to a lectern, and the projector is some distance away. On the other hand, having overhead transparencies allows the presenter to modify their order or even their content until the last minute. This can be helpful, for example, for the last speaker in a session of related presentations, where some material has already been covered by the earlier speakers.

There are other audiovisual technologies besides those summarised in the box, but they tend to be less satisfactory and are probably best avoided. For example, overhead projection screens are available that allow slides to be projected from a computer using an overhead projector. These have the same ease of use as LCD projectors and are considerably less expensive. However, such screens give much poorer quality projection than the other methods, and for best effect usually require expensive overhead projectors rather than the standard types found in most hospitals and small lecture theatres.

Preparing audiovisual aids

Again, the key point to remember is that all the slides or overheads are for the audience, rather than for the presenter. As a general rule, text or graphics for audiovisual aids must be prepared especially for this purpose. Tables or graphs from a published paper are usually unsuitable to use as slides, and can be very frustrating for the audience. If you show a table, the entire audience (not just those with keen eyesight

in the front row) must be able to read all the details. This usually means splitting a complex published table into several sections, one on each slide. Similarly with text, showing a copy of something from a published paper or book very seldom works, and usually offers no benefit to the audience (see Box 4).

While preparing the materials, always remember that they serve a different function to illustrations or tables in a paper. The latter must be entirely comprehensible to the reader as they stand, while with the former, it may be neater to leave out some of the details, which the presenter can tell the audience. For example, to show statistically significant figures in a table, rather than identifying these in the customary way with a '*' and having a footnote indicating '* $P < 0.01$ ', it is easier for the audience to see the detail if the relevant figures are in some distinguishing form of text (large font size, italic, emboldened, or preferably in a different colour) and the presenter tells the audience that red means statistically significant.

Giving thought to fonts

It is worth experimenting with different fonts and font sizes, because they show surprising differences

Box 4. Rules for good text slides/overheads

- Avoid small text (minimum 20 point)
- Use simple fonts that are easily legible
- Include no more than 5 bullet points per slide
- Avoid lengthy pieces of text

in their legibility, particularly in a large auditorium. Most people find simple sans-serif fonts easier to read than others (see Box 5). Resist at all costs the temptation to use some fancy font which happens to be on your computer, unless you can justify its use for the benefit of getting across to your audience what you want to say.

If you have your presentation on disk and plan to show it using an unfamiliar computer, bear in mind that normally, the file which you have saved to disk does not save fonts with it. When you open the file on another computer, your fonts will appear as you intended only if they are already loaded in the new computer. If not, the presentation or word-processing software will find some other font to replace that which you intended. This may mean that your previous attempts to line up text boxes or text with graphics are sabotaged! However, there are ways around this. The simplest solution is to use a standard font likely to be found on every computer, like Arial. Alternatively, more recent versions of some presentation graphics packages offer the option of saving your presentation with embedded fonts. However, doing this will make the saved files very much larger.

Bringing it all together

Only very experienced presenters can expect to give consistently good presentations without considerable preparation, including rehearsal. Try if at all possible to avoid reading the text of the presentation verbatim. This may appear the safest option, but it is invariably harder for the audience to follow and usually more soporific than talking spontaneously using notes or cues. Some presenters find it helpful to have their notes on small cue cards, one for each component of the presentation, or for each slide or overhead. Such cue cards are sometimes easier to manipulate than pages of text, but may be problematic if you drop them on your way to the lectern! Even if you are apprehensive about not having the full text of your presentation to rely on, you will probably find that after rehearsing the presentation two or three times with notes that you can give the presentation fluently.

Two particular points to focus on in rehearsal are timing, and introducing your slides. Particularly if the time allocated to your presentation is brief, rehearsal will minimise the chances of your overrunning. Even with rehearsal, it is worth identifying in advance which two or three slides you can omit if you do run short of time. In general, the number of slides you show should never be

Box 5. Examples of simple fonts

This is Arial (11 point)
 This is Century Gothic (11 point)
 This is Frutiger (11 point)
 This is Futura (11 point)
 This is GillSans (11 point)
 This is Helvetica (11 point)

greater than the duration of the presentation in minutes. Remember that although your slides will (hopefully) be familiar to you, you are expecting your audience to take in all the important points on each slide. With complex slides like graphs or tables, it is helpful explicitly to introduce the audience to the key points rather than expecting them to absorb these from the slide without your help while you talk about something else. For example, it may be obvious in a graph what the *x* and *y* axes represent, but stating this while pointing to the axes can sometimes be very helpful to the audience.

It is worth anticipating what questions might be asked after your presentation. If some are likely, plan how you might answer them succinctly.

Final thoughts

The needs and opportunities to communicate information with colleagues are ubiquitous, and doing so is helped by the appropriate use of presentation skills. These skills are worth taking seriously and developing whenever the opportunity arises. Being knowledgeable is no guarantee of being able to get this knowledge across to others. If you are presenting at a conference, good use of presentation skills, including keeping to time, is sure to gain the appreciation of your chairman as well as the audience. However small the audience or parochial the subject, it is always worth making the effort to consider presentation as well as content. By doing so, you maximise the likelihood of getting across what you want the audience to learn, which is, after all, the main point of presenting in the first place.

Further reading

Cottrell, D. (1996) Guidance for presenters of short papers. *Psychiatric Bulletin*, 20, 431–432.