**How to Improve Your Presentation Skills: Preparation**

1) Research your audience. Knowing the needs of your audience can help you tailor your presentation to target their interests and explain how your company can be of use in their specific situation. If you're going to be giving a presentation at an event, Santa Barbara, California-based public speaking coach Lisa Braithwaite suggests sending a questionnaire to a handful of people who will be in the audience before you start writing. Mike Aguilera, a communication expert who has given more than 1,000 presentations on effective communication, says that if he doesn't have time to do research beforehand, he will talk to the audience at his presentation or will even ask them what they're interested in during his speech.

2) Structuring your presentation. 'The classic format is to tell them what you're going to say, present, and then tell them what you told them,' says Aguilera. 'What I advise is to start off with the benefits of what you're going to say, the benefits to the audience, and then present and review.' Braithwaite says that most presentations can benefit from using this simple structure:  
  
    •    Opening - Your opening should be something that makes an emotional connection with the audience.  It can be a story, a question, or a shocking static. It should not be an introduction of yourself or five minutes of thank-yous. David Parnell, the founder of an attorney placement firm who recently finished an 850-page book on the psychology of effective communication, suggests that any stories you use should represent your audience's position in life and should use characters that are analogous to your audience.  
  
    •    Body - Try to stick to your three most important points. It's more important to engage the audience than to tell them everything you know. You will need to leave some information out, but it is likely that what you don't cover in the presentation will come up when you take questions. Keep your outcome in mind. You don't have to write out your presentation word for word (or worse, memorize it) if you just remember to keep going back to your main points and working toward your desired outcome. Be prepared to present both sides of an issue. You'll appear more credible if you acknowledge your competitors or any opposing arguments. After you've explained the other side, you can spell out exactly why your company is better or your argument is stronger.  
  
    •    Closing - The closing of your presentation is the last opportunity you have to give your audience something that will stick in their minds. You can go back to your opening or end on a clever slogan or a call to action. Parnell suggests that when making a business proposal, you end on a positive forecast. 'Your forecast will provide fodder that can serve to validate any subconsciously generated optimism,' he says.  
  
3) Practice, practice, practice...but don't memorize. 'It's different for everybody, but I will say one thing: If you practice your speech only once, you're going to stink,' Braithwaite says. She recommends starting to rehearse your presentation about a month in advance. You can talk into a mirror, talk to a wall, or ask a family member to listen. Some people volunteer to speak at church or join their local toastmaster club for practice speaking in public. Do whatever works for you, but make sure it includes practicing out loud so that you can get a sense of timing.  
  
    •    Rehearsing does not mean memorization - Memorizing your speech can make you sound mechanical and over-rehearsed. 'Really the only people who are good at memorizing things are actors,' Braithwaite says. 'if you're going to do it well, you actually have to act it out and play a character, and most speakers aren't very good at that.' Even if you are good at acting, Parnell suggests that you don't memorize your speech to perfection. 'When an individual is too polished, it makes them relatively inaccessible in the mind of the audience,' he says. 'The audience is human at the end of the day, and this person doesn't seem to be like them.  It really retards the rapport building process.'  
  
    •    Videotape yourself - You can't know how you come off to people until you see it. Recording yourself is the best way to target the areas where you can improve.  
  
    •    Calm your nerves - Aguilera suggests changing the word 'presentation' to 'conversation' when thinking about your big day. Feel better yet? If not, you can also quell panic by conditioning yourself to be in presentation-mode.  Aguilera imagines that he is going to stand up and give a presentation when he's at restaurants, in meetings, or, one time, even at an outdoor amphitheater. 'I walked all the way to the front of the stage as if I were looking for someone,' he says. 'Then I stood there and looked at the audience and said to myself, 'this is what it would feel like to present to 25,000 people.''  
  
    •    Stop working on it - 'You really need time to start getting into relaxation mode,' Braithwaite says. 'You can't be in your hyper rewriting, restructuring mode right up to your presentation.' Take a couple of days to relax before your speech.

**How to Improve Your Presentation Skills: Delivery**

1) Verbal Delivery  
  
    •    Be Brief - A 2005 study by the Helsinki institute found that the average adult was able to focus on a loading web page for only four to eight seconds before looking somewhere else. Attention spans are short; don't dwell on a specific subject too long.  
  
    •    Ask questions to keep the audience engaged - This can be something as simple as pausing to ask if your audience understands everything you've presented thus far.  
  
    •    Speak to your demographic - Match the semantics of your audience as closely as possible. Speak their language. 'If you're selling a skateboard, for instance, your semantics are going to be a lot different than if you're working with a litigation attorney,' Parnell says.  
  
    •    Work on your tone - Evolutionary psychology suggests that people of both sexes respond better to deep male voices and high female voices, Parnell says.  It takes practice to change the tone of your voice, but it can be done.  
  
    •    Avoid speaking softly or other speech patterns that make you seem unconfident - For example, avoid ending sentences in an escalating tone that suggests every sentence you speak is a question.  
  
    •    You should, Umm, avoid, Uh, fill words - Aguilera offers one strategy for kicking a fill-word habit: Say the offending word and concentrate on it. Then tell yourself, 'this is a fill word, I'm avoiding this,'' he says. 'When you say this, it creates that pattern of changing it so that you'll catch yourself when you start saying it.'  
  
    •     Don't use words like don't - Don't think about elephants. Ok, now what are you thinking about? Aguilera says that is why it's important to avoid phrases like 'don't worry.' Tell your audience what they should do instead. Similarly, don't say 'I hope you will enjoy this presentation.' Say, 'I am confident that you will enjoy this presentation.'

2) Body Language  
  
    •    Stand at a comfortable distance - Parnell suggests remaining within 2.5 - 7 feet of your audience. This presupposes (at a subconscious level) a personal to social relationship.  
  
    •    Eye contact - Don't surf the audience with your eyes.  Rather, make eye contact with one person at a time.  
  
    •    Appear confident:  
          a)    Shoulders back  
          b)    Arms at your sides or held in front of your body when making gestures  
          c)    Hands open or only slightly closed  
          d)    Smile slightly or keep your face neutral.  
          e)    Take long strides  
          f)     Make every movement purposeful and decided  
          g)    Treat props (like your resume or a handout) as though they are of value.  Don't let a paper in your hand flap back and forth carelessly.  
  
3) PowerPoint  
  
    •    A Good PowerPoint...  
          a)    Relies heavily on images.  
          b)    Has only one or two sentences per slide.  
          c)    Entertains.  
          d)    Enhances your presentation, but doesn't summarize it.  
  
    •    A Bad PowerPoint...  
          a)    Contains font smaller than 32pt.  
          b)    Has more than five or six lines of text per slide.  
          c)    Displays a logo on every slide (your audience won't forget who you are).  
          d)    Is printed and distributed as a handout.  
  
  
  
**How to Improve Your**[Presentation Skills](https://www.inc.com/jeff-haden/16-ways-to-dramatically-improve-your-presentation-skills-from-16-powerful-ted-ta.html)**: Questions**  
  
Being prepared to answer questions plays a major role in appearing credible to your audience. Parnell says that immediately before their meetings, he asks his clients to write down questions that may come up regarding their presentations. This primes their brains for answering them. It's also important to anticipate any challenges to your presentation that might arise during Q&A time and to prepare responses.  
  
Braithwaite recommends taking questions before the end of your presentation. You'll have to let the audience know that you plan to continue after questions so that they don't start packing up their things, but this approach allows you to close your presentation on your own note. 'The audience will leave with your final message in their minds instead of some random question that someone asked that maybe was off-topic,' she says.

Also, keep in mind that you don't need to answer every question. If you don't know the answer or don't want to answer a question, a graceful exit line is, 'I don't have that information right now, but I would be happy to get it to you as soon as I can.'