

Preparing for a Presentation

Preparation is the single most important part of making a successful presentation. It is an absolutely crucial foundation, and you should dedicate as much time to it as possible, avoiding short-cuts. Good preparation will ensure that you have thought carefully about the messages that you want (or need) to communicate in your presentation and it will also help boost your confidence.

There are a number of aspects that you need to consider when preparing a presentation. They include the aim of the presentation, the subject matter, the audience, the venue or place, the time of day, and the length of the talk. All these will affect what you say and how you say it, as well as the visual aids that you use to get your point across.

The Objective

Whenever you are asked to give a presentation or speak to a group of people, you need to start by asking the purpose of the presentation.

In other words, what is the presentation expected to achieve, and what outcome(s) do the organisers and the audience expect?

These outcomes will shape your presentation, because it must be designed to achieve the objective and deliver the desired outcomes.

For example, you might be asked to give a talk to a gardening club. You might be told that the purpose of the talk is to fill a regular meeting slot, and that the members of the club have expressed a desire to learn more about pruning. You therefore know that your talk needs to be entertaining, fairly light, but knowledgeable, and that your audience wants to learn something new.

The Subject

The subject of your presentation or talk about comes from the objective. They are linked, but they are not necessarily exactly the same thing. For example:

- The subject may be given to you by the organisation that has invited you (such as talking about pruning to the gardening club).
- You may be knowledgeable in a particular field (perhaps you have an interest in local history).
- The subject may be entirely your choice within certain limitations (you might, for example, be asked to give a presentation at an interview on a project which you feel has particularly developed your skills).

The Audience

Before preparing material for a presentation, it is worth considering your prospective audience.

Tailoring your talk to the audience is important and the following points should be considered:

- The size of the group or audience expected.
- The age range - a talk aimed at retired people will be quite different from one aimed at teenagers.
- Gender - will the audience be predominantly male or female?
- Is it a captive audience or will they be there out of interest?
- Will you be speaking in their work or leisure time?
- Do they know something about your subject already or will it be totally new to them? Is the subject part of their work?
- Are you there to inform, teach, stimulate, or provoke?
- Can you use humour and, if so, what would be considered appropriate? If you are in any doubt about this, it is probably best to avoid anything

The Place

It is important to have as much advance information as possible about the place where you are going to speak.

It can be helpful to arrange to see the venue before the event. It does much to quell fear if you can visualise the place while you are preparing your talk. However, even if you cannot visit, you will probably find it helpful to know:

- The size of the room;
- The seating arrangements (for example, theatre-style, with rows of seats; or round-table);
- The availability of equipment, e.g., microphone, laptop and projector, flip chart;
- The availability of power points and if an extension lead is required for any equipment you intend to use;
- If the room has curtains or blinds. This is relevant if you intend to use visual aids, and so that you can ensure the correct ambiance for your presentation;
- The position of the light switches. Check if you need someone to help if you are using audio/visual equipment and need to turn off the lights;
- The likelihood of outside distractions, e.g., noise from another room; and
- The availability of parking facilities so you do not have a long walk carrying any equipment you might need to take.

Length of Talk

Always find out how long you have to talk and check if this includes or excludes time for questions.

Find out if there are other speakers and, if so, where you are placed in the running order. Never elect to go last. Beware of over-running, as this could be disastrous if there are other speakers following you.

It is important to remember that people find it difficult to maintain concentration for long periods of time. This is a good reason for making a presentation succinct, well-structured and interesting. Aim for 45 minutes as a maximum single-session presentation, and preferably leave at least 10 or 15 minutes for questions. Nobody minds finishing a session early.

Providing Information in Advance

Always check what information you will need to provide in advance.

Organisers of big events and conferences often like to have all the PowerPoint presentations several days ahead of the event. This gives them time to load all the presentations, and make sure that they are properly branded for the event.

Some events also need speakers' biographies ahead of time, to put in conference literature. When you are asked to give the presentation, make sure you ask what is needed by when—and then supply it.

You will not be popular if you turn up on the day and announce that you have completely rewritten your presentation on the train. It is entirely possible that the organisers may even not be able to accommodate that, for example if the audio-visual is being supplied by a separate company or by the venue.

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