



The Mechanics of Presenting

The effectiveness of a presentation depends as much on how you look and speak as on what you say. When you are practicing, try various techniques. Speak softly and then more loudly. Change from a slow pace to a faster one. See what works best for what you want to convey.

Every presenter is unique, and as you develop your skills, you will formulate a style that is effective and comfortable for you. Keep in mind, however, the common standards and practices detailed below.

Appearance

Before you even say anything, the audience will form an impression of you based on how you appear. You should be neat and clean. Your hair should be combed and not blocking your face. If you are cooking or using equipment, you may need to have your hair tied back. Hands and fingernails should be clean.

Dress comfortably. You want to be able to concentrate on what you are doing and saying, not be distracted by constricting clothes or uncomfortable shoes. Be sure there are no inappropriate logos or slogans on your clothing. Jewelry that jingles or dangles can get in the way or make distracting noise.

The way you dress can be a visual aid and support your theme. If you are giving a presentation on how to change the oil in a car, you might wear coveralls. Wearing a lab coat can enhance a talk on how to check a horse's vital signs. Your dress should always be appropriate for your subject. An apron is appropriate for a cooking demonstration but not for sewing. Boots are appropriate for a livestock speech but not for a talk on marathon running.

For maximum effect, match your dress with your visuals in color and design. This gives a pleasing look to the presentation and shows that you put time into planning. Team presenters look best when their appearance matches or complements each other.

Posture and Movement

Body language is extremely important. You say almost as much with your body as you do with your mouth! Your posture tells a lot about how comfortable and confident you feel giving your presentation, and how you move can have an impact on the success of your presentation.

Stand in a comfortable position. You should be erect, but not stiff, with your shoulders square. No slouching! Stand with your feet slightly apart (about shoulder-width) and flat on the floor. Keep your weight evenly distributed on both feet, and try not to lock your knees. Let your hands hang comfortably at your side unless you are using them to handle a visual or make a gesture.

Don't lean on the podium or table as this gives the audience the impression you are bored with your own talk. Be careful to not shift your weight from side to side or to rock back and forth. If you become tired standing, move one foot slightly forward or back. This will change your position without looking like swaying.

Try to have your back to the audience as little as possible, and be sure you are facing the audience when you are talking so they can hear you.

You can move and walk around, but don't pace. Switching from one side of the speaking area to the other can be a good way to show transitions. You can also move closer to the audience when you want to emphasize points. Try standing at a slight angle to the audience when what you are saying is supporting points. Then stand square with the audience for important, major points. You will be surprised at how these non-verbal cues help the audience connect.

In an illustrated talk, you should spend most of your time about halfway between the visual aids and the audience. Approach the visuals only when you actually use them. You want to minimize having the audience shift from viewing you to looking at the visual aids. With a demonstration, you will have less time to move away from what you are working on, but move toward the audience when you have a chance.

Eye contact

Eye contact is critical. It invites people into your presentation and makes a difference in how they react to you. Each person should feel like you are talking specifically to them.

The introduction and conclusion are the most important times to maintain eye contact. Make sure you have these parts down pat so you don't have to look at your notecards.

In a contest, don't just look at the judge. You should let your eyes travel from person to person and make contact with everyone in the audience. Try to look directly into their eyes and not over their heads. If you have a large audience, looking at the back third of the room will help you keep your head up. Be sure you don't end up staring at a fixed object.

If you are nervous, look for friendly faces and concentrate more on them. Practice moving your eyes in patterns. For small audiences, moving your eyes back and forth in a semi-circle works well. With large audiences, speakers often move their eyes in a figure eight pattern. As you advance and become more comfortable speaking in front of an audience, you can look for people's reactions to what you are saying and even make some adjustments to your talk.

Delivery

The delivery of your presentation should sound natural, not memorized or like writing. Show enthusiasm; if you are not excited about your subject, why should the audience be? Your delivery style should suit you. Be yourself. Don't imitate others. A distinct style that is all your own will make your presentation memorable.

Nothing puts an audience to sleep faster than listening to someone speak in a boring monotone. Use variation in your delivery. A change in the pitch, volume, or speed and the use of inflections will help maintain interest. To help emphasize main points, try pausing a few moments or change the volume of your speech.

You need to speak loudly enough for everyone in the audience to hear you, even those clear in the back of the room. Usually this means speaking a little louder than you would in normal conversation. Avoid the tendency to drop your voice at the end of sentences.

Most people tend to talk too fast when they are presenting. Make a conscious effort to slow down and make yourself pause, especially between sections of your talk or major points. Speak at a comfortable pace that people can follow. Everyone needs to be able to understand what you saying and have time to process it.

The diction you use is also important. Be sure to speak in complete sentences, using proper grammar and pronunciation. Enunciate clearly. Don't slur your words, and don't use slang. Avoid fillers such as "umm," "er," or "you know." A conversational tone using familiar words is best.

Facial Expressions and Gestures

Facial expressions and gestures can add greatly to your presentation. Expressions show feelings, determination, and confidence. Smiling puts the audience at ease and makes you look like you are enjoying what you are doing. Don't overdo the cheeriness, though; you should look serious if the subject is serious.

Gestures are movements of the body or limbs to emphasize an idea. Common gestures include pointing, shrugging your shoulders, or shaking your fist. Gestures can be very powerful, but they can also be distracting. Make sure they enhance your presentation, not detract from it. Don't overuse them. Gestures should appear to be spontaneous and look natural. If using gestures does not come naturally to you, don't use them. Trying to "act" when you are not comfortable with it usually doesn't work.

Poise

Something that is difficult to measure is poise or a sense of a stage presence. Poised presenters will enter and leave the speaking area with confidence. They will appear relaxed, prepared, and self-assured.

Poise is often assessed by how a presenter handles things that go wrong. Remember that problems or errors usually seem much worse to you than they do to the audience. When something unexpected happens, simply continue on. If possible, explain what happened and how it should have been. There is no need to apologize. Mistakes happen to everyone, so don't let them upset you. If you cope and move on, you will get high marks for poise.

Humor

Depending on the topic of your presentation, humor can be a great addition. Beware, however, of overdoing it. Remember the purpose of a presentation should not be solely to entertain; there should be some education involved as well.

Use of Notes

Ideally, you should have practiced your presentation enough that you won't need to use notes. Use them only if they are necessary. The less you use them, the better.

If you do need to use notes, it's best to use notecards, not full sheets of paper. Use a full sheet of paper only if you can fit everything on one sheet that you can lay on a table or podium.

The print on the notecards should be large enough for you to read it a quick glance. Try to limit your notecards to just main ideas and key words. You don't want to read your presentation.

You can hold the notecards in your hand or lay them on the podium or table. Don't try to hide them. If you are giving an illustrated talk or a demonstration, your visual aids can be your notes. A poster of the outline of your talk is a reminder to you of the order of your presentation and is also a help to the audience in following along.

Mannerisms to Avoid

A few common mannerisms are very distracting. Work hard to avoid these. They include:

- Jangling change or jewelry
- Playing with your hair
- Rocking back and forth
- Chewing gum

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