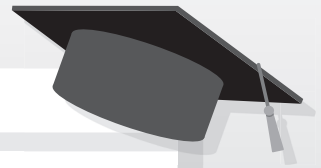


Unit **I**

Exploring Key Ideas



Learning Objectives

- Develop a critical understanding of the key ideas surrounding academic presentations;
- Explore the standards for good presentations;
- Reflect on previous academic presentation experiences to identify strengths and areas for improvement;
- Apply effective strategies to overcome stage fright and build confidence in making good academic presentations.

Part 1 Overview

1. Importance of Academic Presentations

Nowadays, academic presentations are widely used in graduate studies and research. Having effective presentation skills is essential to your academic success and professional development. Academic presentations provide great opportunities for you to demonstrate your knowledge in your area of study or research topic and your ability to engage, educate, and persuade the audience. Learning how to make successful presentations can prepare you for academic careers and help you succeed in future professional settings since the ability to communicate is one of the most important qualities in academic and professional environments.

Many people may view a presentation as an activity in which the presenter gives information and the audience take information, and thus think that doing a presentation mainly benefits the audience. However, this perception of presentations does not reflect their true nature. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, presentations involve bi-directional communication between the presenter and the audience: The presenter sends a message to the audience, while the audience provides feedback to the presenter by showing their interest, attention, and other signals such as body positions and eye contact.

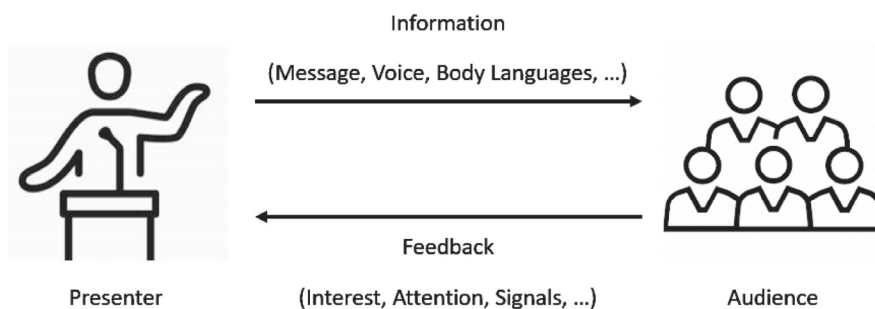


Figure 1.1 An illustration of the bi-directional communication process in a presentation

It is important to realize that presentations can provide learning opportunities for both the audience and the presenter. When preparing a presentation, you need to conduct research and apply deep thinking on a particular topic or issue, which helps you deepen your understanding of the subject and identify potential gaps in your knowledge. During a presentation, the feedback received from the audience can effectively help you identify issues in your delivery of messages and presentation dynamics. In addition, by organizing your materials and developing innovative ways of capturing your audience’s attention and interest in a presentation, you can also practice your research, communication, and leadership skills.

Broadly speaking, giving presentations can be particularly useful in developing the following abilities of the presenters (Joughin, 2010):

- knowledge skills and critical analysis;
- applied problem-solving abilities;
- ability to research and prepare persuasive arguments;
- ability to generate and synthesize ideas;
- ability to communicate effectively;
- ability to articulate information clearly and concisely;
- ability to present information to an audience with appropriate use of visual and technical aids;
- time management;
- interpersonal and group skills.

2. Common Forms of Academic Presentations

Giving a successful presentation involves factors related to you, your audience, and the environmental settings. In addition to the quality of your presentation, the presentation form that you use can also influence the dynamics of your presentation and impact your target audience. In general, academic presentations can be categorized into the following common forms:

1) Oral presentations without slides

In oral presentations, you speak in front of the audience without resorting to other devices. You use your words, emotions, and body language to set the dynamics of your presentation and deliver your message. Although the form of this type of presentation is simple, it imposes high requirements on the presenter to build an inclusive scene and effectively engage the audience.

2) Slide presentations

Slide presentations are a widely adopted form of presentation in which the presenter uses slides as visual aids to support conveying messages. By presenting in front of the audience with carefully designed slides, you can effectively attract the audience's attention towards you, enhance their understanding of your points, and create a more lasting impact on them than using oral input alone.

3) Poster presentations

While slide presentations are frequently used in various scenarios, poster presentations are often seen in the poster sessions at academic conferences. Instead of using presentation slides, presenters share their research by using large, printed posters. Also, the way of

interacting with the audience is more interactive and less formal.

4) Online presentations

In addition to presentations that are made face-to-face, online presentations have become increasingly common in recent years. They allow the presenter to give a presentation virtually by simply sharing the screen during an online meeting or sharing a pre-recorded video. While presenting onsite enables you to observe your audience's feedback and changing attitudes towards your presentation and thus respond accordingly, online presentations have advantages, too. One of the primary advantages is that the presenter can do it from anywhere, and the audience can participate wherever they have an Internet connection.

3. Standards for Good Presentations

Regardless of the different features of different presentation forms, good presentations in any form possess similar attributes and share the same standards. In general, the standards for good presentations may include the following aspects:

- **Content:** A good presentation aims to be clear, concise, and insightful. The main message should be communicated effectively without complex jargon and confusing ideas.
- **Structure:** A good presentation should have a clear structure that is easy for the audience to follow.
- **Value:** A good presentation should speak to the audience's interests and needs. It should be tailored to the audience and provide value for them.
- **Engagement:** A good presentation should effectively engage the audience and hold their attention. In addition to having interesting and valuable content, the speaker can encourage engagement from the audience by asking questions, soliciting feedback, and using interactive activities.
- **Timing:** A good presentation is delivered within the allotted time, which ensures that the presentation stays focused and shows respect for the audience's time.
- **Confidence:** In a good presentation, the presenter should be confident and enthusiastic about his/her presentation.
- **Practice:** A good presentation should be well-prepared and practiced.

4. Stage Fright

When you are giving a presentation, feeling nervous or anxious about speaking in front of the public is completely natural. The fear that something might go wrong, such as making mistakes, looking silly, being unable to answer questions, or dealing with failing devices, is

experienced by almost everyone who has spoken in public.

In fact, feeling nervous before a presentation shows that the presentation is important to you and that you want to perform well. It is actually a healthy response to the pressure you may have before the presentation. Without any nervousness, you may feel less motivated towards your presentation and even forget what you need to address. In addition, nervousness can enable you to become more alert and thus channel your energy into doing it well.

Knowing that everyone feels nervous about speaking in public and nervousness can be beneficial to your success is a very important step towards understanding stage fright. In the next part, you will also learn some practical tips to help you control your nervousness so that it will not grow too much to overload you and negatively impact your performance.

Part 2 Strategies for Building Confidence in Making Good Presentations

1. Strategies for Making Good Presentations

Making a good presentation can be challenging, which requires careful and thoughtful consideration of essential elements involved in the process, such as the audience, visual aids, engagement, time management, and presentation delivery. Here are a few tips on how to take these elements into account for making a good presentation.

1) Know your audience

The first one is to know your audience as accurately as possible. They may be experts in your field, peer students, or sometimes non-specialists with general backgrounds. Different audiences require different levels and amounts of information. The success of a presentation depends on anticipating and knowing the audience in advance. Under- or overestimating the target audience is one of the most common mistakes that presenters make. Therefore, before developing your presentation, you should research your audience to gauge what they know and do not know about your topic. Then, you can determine the aim of your presentation and align it with your audience's goals or expectations: to inform, to persuade, to instruct, to inspire, or to entertain. Depending on your aim, the structure and content of your presentation may vary significantly.

2) Use visual aids effectively

Presentation slides are a very useful and powerful tool when you make a presentation. In general, you want to use more visuals and relatively few words. It is important to note that putting speaking notes on the slides and then reading them when presenting often result in unattractive and ineffective presentations.

Research shows that images help with memory and learning (Golash-Boza, 2018). Use this fact to your advantage by searching and using images that help you make your point. One useful strategy is that you can use images with blank spaces in them so that you can annotate those images to better convey your point (See Figure 1.2 for an example).



Figure 1.2 Using images

3) Engage your audience

Experienced presenters often take time to design their presentations in a way that actively engages their audience. This may involve grabbing the audience's attention at the beginning, maintaining and regaining their attention in the middle, and leaving a strong impression on them at the end. The engagement not only contributes to the audience's understanding of your message but also leads to a lasting impact on them after your presentation.

4) Refine your delivery

A careful design of presentation slides alone does not guarantee an effective presentation. How the presenter delivers the presentation directly impacts the effect of the presentation. For example, experienced presenters make eye contact with their audience, use gestures intentionally and effectively, pay attention to the volume of voice and pace, dress appropriately, and so on. All these elements factor into an overall impact on the audience and their attitudes towards the presentation.

5) Manage your time

Prepare your presentation material according to the time allotted to you. If you have ten minutes to present, prepare ten minutes of material. Do not prepare more materials than you can finish within the allotted time. If you write down your speaking notes, a general rule of thumb is that it takes around two minutes to read out a double-spaced page. Rehearsing your presentation helps you adjust the content to the time limit. If there is a Q&A section at the end of your presentation, you should also leave enough time for inviting and answering questions. Remember that good time management shows your respect for the audience's time and is always appreciated.

2. Strategies for Dealing with Stage Fright

Although experiencing stage fright is natural in presentations, some strategies can help you control it and alleviate its consequences.

- Be aware that nervousness is normal and is experienced by every speaker.
- Use nervousness to your advantage—transform your nervousness into a dynamic energy about your topic and presentation.
- Keep in mind that you and the audience have the same goal: enjoy a presentation. Therefore, your audience are your friends, and they want you to succeed as much as you do.
- Focus your attention on delivering your message, not on your feelings and expectations.
- Keep your presentation within the realm of your knowledge and experience, which can help you build confidence and minimize your nervousness.
- Arrive in advance and get familiar with the room, including its temperature, size, and overall setup.
- Start by welcoming your audience warmly, use eye contact and a welcoming posture, thank them for coming, and calm yourself down.
- Keep presenting and practicing. The best strategy for handling nervousness and keeping your nervousness under control is to be well prepared. Your nervousness decreases when the number of presentations that you give increases.

The aforementioned strategies can function as basic guidelines for creating good presentations and dealing with stage fright. The most important thing for you is to actively apply these strategies in your presentations and keep refining your presentation skills.

Reflections and Practice

I Watch the TED talk (“How to Make Stress Your Friend” by Kelly McGonigal) and discuss the following questions.

1. How much stress did you experience last year?
2. What was your perception of stress before watching this TED talk? Did you view stress as something positive or negative?
3. Have you changed your attitude towards stress after watching this TED talk? Why or why not?

4. What do you think are the key message and main purpose of this TED talk?
5. Do you think this TED talk is useful or brings something new to you? Which aspects of this TED talk do you find most valuable?

II Watch the talk again, focusing on the strategies the speaker used, and discuss the following questions.

1. Which presentation form (oral presentation without slides, slide presentation, poster presentation, or online presentation) did the speaker use? Would you choose a different form if you were the speaker?
2. Did you notice that there is a structure or organizational pattern behind this talk? What is it?
3. Do you think the speaker knew the audience well? Why or why not?
4. How did the speaker engage the audience during her presentation? Do you think it was effective? Why or why not?
5. What strategies that the speaker used are applicable to your own presentations?

III Work in groups of four or five. Each of you finds a presentation and analyzes its strengths and weaknesses based on the standards for good presentations discussed in this unit. Complete the table below by noting down the title, key message, strengths and weaknesses of the presentation you selected. And then share your results with your group members.

Titles	Key Messages	Strengths	Weaknesses

- IV** The table below lists the strategies for making good presentations. Select one of your previous presentations and review the strategies you used. Complete the table below by filling out the title of the presentation, whether you used these strategies or not, and how you used them in your presentation. If you used other strategies that are not listed in the table, add them to the table.

Title of the Presentation:		
Strategies	Did You Use This Strategy? (Yes / No)	How Did You Use It?
Know your audience		
Use visual aids effectively		
Engage your audience		
Refine your delivery		
Manage your time		
Others		

- V** Review the key ideas and strategies discussed in this unit and recall your previous presentations. Then write a short reflection (150–250 words) to respond to the following questions.

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your previous presentations?
2. Which strategy do you think is the most helpful for improving your presentations?
3. Have you experienced stage fright when doing presentations before? In which phase (before, during, and after a presentation) did you feel most nervous? Why?
4. What kind of strategies did you use to calm down? How effective were they? What new strategies do you want to try to deal with stage fright in your future presentations?