



Schar School of Policy and Government

Professional Presentations Guide for Students

Oral presentations are an essential skill for any professional. The only way to prepare yourself for public speaking is to practice. Presentations are required in Schar School of Policy and Government classes to give you the opportunity to practice before an audience. The following hints should help you make your class and other presentations as effective and convincing as possible.

Overall, you want to command the attention of your listeners and help them understand and remember your key points. By your demeanor, dress, voice, and eye contact, as well as the content of your presentation, you are implicitly answering two questions that each person in the audience has: Why should I pay attention to you? Why should I believe you?

Act Professionally

Your clothes and demeanor should project professionalism. Even class presentations should be taken seriously. Dress should be appropriate. Do not wear jeans, t-shirts, tennis shoes or hats. Polish your shoes. Stand up straight and look at your audience. Hold your notes still in your hands. Keep both feet firmly planted on the floor. Do not lean on the podium or on a wall. Keep your hands out of your pockets. Excessive informality is generally unbecoming in a speaker, unless you are Will Rogers (i.e., a comedian as opposed to a policy professional). Following these tips will lend toward your believability.

Organize Your Remarks

In your introduction, frame the issue you are addressing and present a brief overview of your remarks. Foreshadow, but do not give away your conclusions. One approach is to think of yourself as delivering a mystery story. Make it exciting and build toward a suspenseful conclusion. Make sure the audience knows the main point of your talk so they can listen more effectively. Organize your talk in a logical manner and show the audience how the separate parts fit together.

The single most crucial action you can take, however, is to make clear to the audience why your topic is of importance. At the beginning and at the end of your talk you should answer the following questions: What is important about you are saying and why is your message important to this particular audience?

This second question should help you focus your remarks on the listeners, not on you. Are they sure to know the specialized language or acronyms you are using? If not, then do not use such jargon or abbreviations without telling the audience what you mean. Remember, the idea is not to show how

smart you are. The purpose of your talk is to communicate clearly to your audience. Hence, you must calibrate your remarks for your particular audience. After you have fully constructed your presentation, you should translate that presentation from an essay into a detailed outline that you will use in the presentation. Use 3x5 cards for this purpose. The outline on the cards should include key words that will remind you of what you want to say. Specific data that you want to cite can also be included on the cards. For example, if 20% of traffic accidents in Virginia occur when a driver involved is texting on a mobile device, you might put in your outline the following: 20% traffic accidents (VA): texting. The reason for using cards is that the notes you use should be unobtrusive. The outline is a way to keep you on track and on time while preventing you from reading your remarks.

Your audience must believe that you know what you are talking about. Reading your presentation is a sure sign that you do not know what you are talking about. By the time of your presentation, you should have rehearsed your remarks sufficiently so that you are thoroughly familiar with the material.

You might practice in front of a mirror in order to see yourself as others will see you. With each practice run, time yourself. It is important that you stay within the time allotted and that you not rush through the last part of your presentation, which should typically have the largest impact on your audience.

Making Your Presentation

Start strongly and confidently. The best way to implement this tip and all of the others is to practice, practice, practice and then practice some more.

Prior to giving your talk, you should do advance work at the site of the presentation. Specifically, you need to come fully prepared with your PowerPoint presentation, if you are using one, already loaded and the overhead projector warmed up before you reach the rostrum.

Another aspect of proper advance work is to always have backup copies of your presentation that you can distribute to the audience in case the technology is not working. Never assume that the technology will function properly! If possible come early and practice with the microphone before the audience arrives. You can determine exactly where to position the mic so that you can be heard and so that the mic does not squeak.

When you begin your talk, here are some actions not to take: Do not apologize for a cold, a scratchy voice, or anything else. Do not tap the microphone or blow into it and ask if it is working. Do not ask if you can be heard. Never say, I am not sure why I have been invited to speak to you today. You need to come across as confident and in charge: You know what you are doing, you know why you are speaking, and you have the authority to be believed.

Try to make the audience feel you are really happy to be there and speaking to them. Act as if it were the opportunity of a lifetime. Stand up straight and look at your audience. Hold the notes still in your hands. Before your first words, take a deep breath or two. This simple action will prevent your voice from squeaking and will calm you more than you might imagine.

Make eye contact with the audience throughout your presentation (moving slowly from person to person or at least area to area depending on size of audience). Do not hide behind the podium. Be mobile if the set up allows. However, if you are using a stationary microphone, do not move away from it. If you do move around, be sure you are limiting your movement and not distracting the audience from what you are saying.

As you should be speaking from an outline, you should use your notes by glancing down at them when necessary. Speak in your own voice and explain your ideas in your own words. You must project your voice to the back of the room. Make certain the person most distant from the podium can hear you by looking at the last row and reading their body language. Speak slowly and clearly. Never rush your remarks.

If you naturally have a soft voice, you must practice breathing from your diaphragm and projecting your voice to the back of the room. Get a friend to help you practice. Remember, if your audience cannot hear you, they will not pay attention to what you are saying. All of your preparation will have been a waste of time.

As you proceed do not use filler words repeatedly, e.g., like, ok, uh, or as I said. Sound sure of your facts. Be specific. Do not use adjectives like sort of and kinda.

Using PowerPoint

You may use Power Point if it helps you present your ideas more effectively; e.g., for illustrations, diagrams, data, charts, graphs, or an outline. Do not put your entire talk on power point slides, and do not read from the slides. In constructing your slides, make certain that the person in the audience most distant from it can read the screen easily. That means you should limit what you place on each slide.

Never turn to and read from the screen. Do not speak to the screen. Point at the screen only when absolutely necessary. If you do need to direct your listeners to a particular spot on the slide, make sure you use the hand closest to the screen. If available, a laser pointer is much preferable to physical pointing.

Answering Question

Once you have completed your prepared remarks, you are likely to be asked to take some questions. If so, remember that the question and answer (Q and A) session is as important as the formal presentation. At this point, the audience will be judging how well you really understand your topic and its implications. The impressions of the listeners formed during this period are the last and, likely, most enduring ones they will have of you and will determine their readiness to believe you.

Here are some tips to make this part of your presentation effective:

- Be patient. Sometimes listeners need to put together what you have said before they are ready to ask a question. Just wait. Do not try to fill in the silence.
- Listen carefully to the question asked, both the literal question and, possibly, any underlying concern evidenced by the questioner. You want to be able to address both.

- If you do not understand the question, ask for a clarification from the questioner.
- Repeat a brief version of the question for the audience.
- Answer as directly as you can. Do not filibuster. Yes, you know a lot, but you do not need to demonstrate your breadth of knowledge at this point. Leave time for other questions.
- Do not be defensive. The problem with this advice is that often you may not know that you are sounding defensive. Here is one reason you should practice Q and A with a partner who will be honest with you and help you identify areas for improvement.
- Never get into a colloquy or an argument with a member of the audience. You have the rostrum and attention of the audience, and you can ignore what you want.
- If you are making a joint presentation with one or more other people, share the opportunity to answer with all members of your team as equally as possible. If one person dominates, the audience may conclude that the others are uninformed or they may decide that you are unfairly domineering the session.
- Use the Q and A to improve your presentation in the future and to give you new ideas for research.

Here are some techniques you can use if you do not know the answer to a question:

- If you cannot answer the question, say so. You could respond that you do not know, but you plan to look into the matter or simply acknowledge that the questioner has made a point that you have yet to investigate.
- You could say, "I do not know the answer to the specific question, but this is how I would think about it." This allows you to imply that some data are necessary to deal with a broad generalization made in a question.
- Another technique that is useful for public speaking when a person asks an off-the-wall question is to answer the question that should have been asked (on the general topic), rather than the question that was actually asked.

Having fun presenting

Presenting need not be a chore. It can even be fun, especially if you prepare adequately ahead of time and believe in your message, its accuracy and its importance.

[Prepared by Professors Rudder, Fritschler, and Pfiffner, December 2010]