
10 Top Tips for Academic Presentations

Practice in different situations

It's normal to feel nervous before giving a presentation and you may not be able to get rid of your nerves entirely, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing. The adrenaline produced by a nervous response can also help you stay sharp and responsive during the presentation. If you think your nerves are getting in the way of presenting effectively, though, try practicing in a controlled environment where you feel more comfortable and gradually building up from there.

So, you might start by just presenting aloud to yourself, then try in front of a few friends, then try recording yourself etc. Practice doesn't necessarily make perfect, but it can make you more comfortable with the experience and help you channel that nervous energy.

Limit the scope of your argument

Be realistic about how much ground you can cover in your allotted time and limit your scope accordingly. It's easy to overestimate how much you can talk about in a presentation and whilst presenting on something for even 10-minutes might feel like a lot, it's roughly the equivalent of 1500 words including 'housekeeping language' like introductions and signposting. Focus your presentation by writing down the key message/s that you want your audience to take away and check that everything you say contributes to that message.

Keep an eye on the time

One of the biggest complaints of audiences is when presentations go over time, so do a timed readthrough beforehand to make sure you're not trying to fit too much in. If you do find yourself overrunning due to an unexpected issue it's better to skip your final point and jump straight to the conclusion than to start speaking faster or stop speaking abruptly. The audience may not notice a small piece of missing content, but they will notice if you don't conclude the presentation.

Prepare some responses for the Q&A

If your presentation is followed by a Q&A, you can't always know what questions will be asked, but there are some common question types that you can prepare for. Two common question types are: 'tell me again' questions (asking you to clarify something from the presentation) and 'tell me more' questions (asking you to give more detail on something you only mentioned briefly in the presentation).

To prepare for ‘tell me again’ questions, try and identify the most complicated parts of the presentation and come up with a few different ways to explain them. And to prepare for ‘tell me more’ questions, identify which areas you only get to touch on briefly and remind yourself of other relevant information (any points you cut out due to time constraints might be a good start).

Decide whether to show or tell information

If you’re using PowerPoint, Prezi, handouts or other presentation aids, avoid filling them up with all your ideas. This unnecessarily duplicates information and can be distracting for the audience. Instead try to keep things simple, noting down only the main ideas in a clearly visible size (at least 24 point), font (sans serifs) and colour (high contrast is best). You don’t need to write in full sentences either, just the key phrases are usually enough. Remember, you are the presentation, everything else is just a visual aid.

Cater to your audience

Not all presentations are the same and an academic presentation is different to a TED talk, a business pitch, or public speaking. When used for assessment, academic presentations often require you to demonstrate your knowledge on a topic and the ability to do something with that knowledge, as well as your presentation delivery skills. Check the assignment brief and marking criteria to find out what skills you need to demonstrate and when preparing your presentation ask yourself if, where, and how you’re demonstrating them.

Keep the language simple

It can be quite difficult to process complex information just by listening. You might need to use technical vocabulary, but you can make it easier for your audience to follow your presentation by using simple sentence structures and repeating the key messages several times throughout. Spoken language is also less formal than written language, so although it might feel out of place to use contractions (e.g. don’t) or the first person ‘I’ in a written assessment, it can make your presentation sound and feel more natural.

Slow your speech down

If you’re feeling nervous or just want to get the presentation over with, then you might naturally find yourself speaking faster than normal, but this can make it difficult for the reader to follow what you’re saying (especially if you’re delivering a presentation online and not using a webcam). There’s no perfect pace, but as a rule of thumb try to speak about one third (33%) slower than you usually would. This might feel a bit unnatural at first, so practice saying the presentation out loud at this

reduced pace to get used to how it feels. You might also want to record yourself and listen back to find out how it sounds to the audience.

Remind yourself to make eye contact

Whether you're presenting in person or online, eye contact (or webcam contact!) is a good way of keeping the audience engaged with the presentation, but it can be hard to remember to do this when you're focused on all the other things involved in delivering a presentation. As a reminder, try adding occasional prompts to look at the audience throughout your notes. And if you're finding looking at the webcam off-putting, placing a picture of a friend or family member next to it can make it feel a bit more comfortable.

Experiment with different kinds of presentation notes

You can script your presentation and read it aloud if that makes you feel comfortable, but you don't have to. You might decide that you'd rather jot down a few notes, use your visual aids as a memory prompt or even memorise/ improvise the whole thing. There's no one right approach and each has its own strengths and weaknesses (writing out a script can feel more stable, but might lead to a flat delivery, whereas memorising can seem more natural, but makes it easier to overrun or miss out important points). You might want to practice with different types of notes until you find one that works for you, but if in doubt choose whatever makes you feel most comfortable.