

Practising your Presentation

Giving yourself the time and space to practise is crucial to delivering a strong academic presentation as it can enable you to recall your main points more easily, make you feel more comfortable with the material, and help anticipate possible problems or blind spots and think through ways of resolving them. But a question you might well ask is ‘what’s the best way to practise a presentation?’ Is it better to go over the presentation in your head? Read it aloud? Deliver it in front of others? Perform in front of a mirror? There’s no single answer to this question as the kind of practice that’s most beneficial to you depends on what you want to work on. This guide will help you explore different strategies and find the practice/s that work for you.

Why should I practise delivering my presentation?

- **Revising.** It can help you edit, revise and improve your presentation.
- **Re-enforcing.** It can help re-enforce the main messages of your presentation, making them easier to recall and communicate.
- **Reassuring.** It can help you feel more comfortable when delivering the real presentation.

When should I practise delivering my presentation?

Presentation practice isn’t just about learning how to deliver an already completed presentation, it’s also an opportunity to identify things you might need to change and/or improve. You may find that how you plan to communicate your work on paper actually sounds or feels different when spoken aloud (which is ultimately how it will be delivered). So rather than waiting until you’ve ‘finished’ your presentation to start practising, it can be useful to practise early and often as an editing tool. In fact, if you find yourself stuck ‘writing your presentation’, you might find that switching to ‘saying your presentation’ is an effective alternative.

How should I practise delivering my presentation?

Authentic Practice

If you don’t yet know what aspects of your presentation you want to focus on improving, ‘authentic practice’ can be a good place to start. This kind of practice aims to deliver the presentation in

conditions as close as possible to those that you'll be experiencing on the day. It's easy to get put off or distracted by small differences, so the more authentic you make your practice the more comfortable you'll feel delivering the real thing. So if you're going to be standing, then practise delivering the presentation while standing. If you're going to be presenting to a webcam, then practise presenting to a webcam. If you're going to use technology like PowerPoint, then practise delivering with PowerPoint.

It's not always possible (or necessary) to make your practice 100% authentic, so there may be times when you need to improvise. For example, if presenting in person, you may not be able to practise in the physical location beforehand, but if you know what it looks like you can try moving furniture around at home to mirror the layout and use pictures or objects in the room as stand-ins for the audience.

Targeted Practice

Once you've done some authentic practice and have a better idea of what particular things you want to improve, you can try some of the targeted practice strategies below to address these specific issues.

Film yourself

Although it can feel uncomfortable, using a phone or webcam to film yourself delivering the presentation is a great way of seeing it from the audience's perspective. This can help you notice any habits or issues that you would otherwise miss, like distracting or defensive body language or an excessively fast/slow pace of delivery. This initial discomfort can also help you get more comfortable with the feeling of 'being watched' that many people find difficult when delivering a presentation. Be careful though, it's possible to be too critical (especially when watching back footage of yourself) so it can be useful to get another person's opinion on the footage to see if they notice the same things you do.

Useful for: working on body language, working on pace of delivery, getting used to being watched

Gradually increase your level of exposure

If you're feeling nervous about presenting in front of others, try easing yourself in by gradually presenting to more and more people. Try starting by just presenting to yourself in a mirror, then to a close friend or family member, then several (if possible). Easing into it can make the experience of presenting to a large group of people feel less daunting.

Useful for: getting used to presenting in front of others, re-enforcing the presentation.

Gradually decrease your use of notes

You don't have to memorise your entire presentation, and it's acceptable to read aloud from a well-crafted script (but don't forget to make occasional eye contact with the audience). However, if you want to use your notes/script as a memory prompt, try presenting several times using fewer and

fewer notes each time, until you are mainly using it as a reminder or using notecards instead. This approach can make it easier for you to remember key parts, ideas and/or phrases of the presentation and provide a more natural delivery.

Useful for: Making delivery more natural, re-enforcing the presentation

Practise using different intonations

If you're concerned about 'over-rehearsing' and starting to sound monotonous in your delivery, a technique used by actors is to deliver your presentation using a range of different intonations and emotions (e.g. like you're angry, sad, excited). This can help you remember what you want to say, but without it sounding over-rehearsed or robotic.

Useful for: Making delivery more natural, re-enforcing the presentation

Time yourself

It's easy to underestimate how long it takes to communicate something verbally, so it's a good idea to time yourself presenting so that you don't end up running too long (or too short). Try using a stopwatch on your phone or computer to time yourself and make a note of how long it takes to deliver each section. This can help you identify where you're spending the most time and check that you're keeping to time for future deliveries. If you find that you're consistently running long, this might be a sign that you need to simplify some parts or cut them out altogether. Avoid just speeding up your pace of delivery, though, as this can make it difficult for the audience to follow your presentation.

Useful for: revising the presentation, working on pace of delivery, feeling more comfortable

Practise with visuals

If using visual aids like handouts, diagrams or presentation software, you might want to specifically practise if/how you plan to interact with, draw attention to or explain your visuals. Adding reminders of when to transition between slides to your notes can help ensure that your slides are in synch with your presentation. If presenting in person, practise presenting with your visuals behind you to get used to referring to materials without spending too much time looking at them. This can be particularly important when delivering a poster presentation.

Useful for: revising the presentation, feeling more comfortable

Be selective about what you practise

You don't always have to start practising your presentation from the beginning. In fact, if you're delivering a long presentation, always starting from the beginning can result in a strong opening, but weaker middle and conclusion as it's easy to lose energy and focus towards the end. If you think this might be the case, try practising your presentation from the middle or focus on a particular section you're finding the most difficult.

Useful for: revising your presentation

Stagger your practice

It's easier to remember something if you practise recalling it multiple times over a long period. So rather than practising your presentation 3 times in a row or just before you present, try spacing practice sessions throughout the day (or even over the course of several days).

Useful for: Re-enforcing the presentation.

Remember, you're not limited to one particular practice strategy. You may want to switch between authentic and targeted practice as a way of continuously identifying areas to work on and making your presentation stronger and stronger. You can also try combining multiple types of targeted practice (e.g. both timed practice and gradual exposure, or both filming yourself and practising with visuals).