

Presentation skills

The following transcript is based on material in *Presentation Skills for Students* by Joan van Emden and Lucinda Becker.

Speaking confidently in public and getting your point across effectively is perhaps the single most useful skill you will learn as a student: years later, when you've long forgotten all your coursework and when your career has developed in ways you never even imagined, you'll almost certainly still need to be able to engage people's attention and put across your point of view. In this audio file we'll look at strategies for overcoming one of the most common problems that inexperienced speakers run into when they're presenting: speaking too fast, and not allowing sufficient time for pauses.

Why is this a problem, you might say? Surely it's better to get the presentation over with as quickly as possible so that you can sit down again, and anyway won't a longer, slower presentation mean an even more bored audience? In fact the opposite is true: speaking too quickly leaves your audience frustrated as they probably haven't caught everything you've said and they've not had time to understand it fully, never mind consider how it fits with their own knowledge and experience, so they are likely simply to give up the effort of listening.

The most crucial part of a presentation is the beginning, which unfortunately is exactly where you're most likely to feel nervous and be tempted to go too fast. If you take the time to give a good introduction, giving your audience an idea of the overall pattern of your presentation, its story-line, if you like, this has a double benefit: first, understanding the logical sequence of information allows the audience to absorb and remember the presentation, and secondly, this non-critical information gives the audience time to adjust to your voice and settle themselves comfortably. Which means that when you are ready to start talking about the essential stuff, they're ready to listen.

Once you start on the main presentation, it's especially important to keep your speech slow and clear if you're using technical or specialist words that may not all be familiar to your audience, or which you may stumble over if you try to say them too quickly. Numbers too are difficult to catch if they're said too quickly, or if the speaker doesn't leave a slight pause before and after them to make sure they don't run into the surrounding words. Compare the following two examples of the same fairly complex sentence delivered at different speeds, and see which makes more immediate sense to you:

[gabbled] *A massive meteor impact about 65 million years ago resulted in an impact crater 113 miles wide in the Yucatan Peninsula*

[spoken more slowly and clearly] *A massive meteor impact about 65 million years ago resulted in an impact crater 113 miles wide in the Yucatan Peninsula*

Did you notice how in the first sentence 'about 65 million years' sounded as though it were all one word? Like technical terms, numbers tend to be picked up on by any listeners taking notes, so it's important to speak slowly enough to allow people to note them down without losing the thread of your talk.

As well as consciously slowing down the speed at which you speak, you can also use pauses to give your listeners more time to absorb what you're saying. Don't be afraid of pauses: they can signal a change of topic or a particularly important point, and they can also help to keep you calm and in control by giving you time to check your notes. Last but not least, they allow you to take a breath, so you don't end up gasping in the middle of your sentences!

One very practical way to build in pauses and a change of pace and focus into your talk is to include visual aids of some kind: PowerPoint slides, handouts,

demonstrations and so on. Purely from the point of view of speed, giving your audience something to look at something other than yourself can help by taking the pressure off you so you feel less tempted to gabble, and can also provide a natural pause while your audience absorbs the visual material after you've explained it.

Another good tip is to use your notes to remind yourself when to take a pause. One of our favourite tips is to leave a margin on your note cards in which you can write messages for yourself, such as when to change the slide. If you know you tend to speak too quickly, write 'slow down!' in big red letters at the top of each card; if you know there's a particular point at which you need to pause to signal a transition between two ideas, or to allow the audience to study a diagram, writing PAUSE in the margin means you're much more likely to remember to stop.

Good presenting is largely a matter of experience, and these are just a few of the many practical steps you can take to make sure your early presentations are successful and build up your confidence for the future.

Good luck!