

PRESENTING YOUR RESEARCH

As a research student, the ability to speak formally about research becomes increasingly important. You may give presentations in a class, at an ACAP seminar or research day, or at external seminars and conferences. You will be expected to speak about your research confidently and succinctly, so it's worth investing time to develop your presentation skills.

Audience expectations

The first consideration in preparing for any oral presentation of your research is to determine who is in your audience. Is it composed of other research students and staff who are familiar with your topic? Or are the people in your audience unfamiliar with your research area?

You must also consider what they are expecting. For example, if you are presenting your research proposal, your audience will be expecting you to:

- Articulate a research problem and research questions (and, in some cases, a tentative hypothesis)
- Demonstrate your knowledge of previous research on the topic and your understanding of the 'gaps'
- Explain the methods you propose to use and justify why you have chosen these methods

If you are presenting the findings of your research, your audience will also be expecting you to:

- Communicate your results clearly and succinctly
- Discuss your results in light of the literature
- Highlight the significance of your study and the theoretical, empirical and/or practical implications of your findings



Hooking your audience

Another area for consideration is how to 'hook' your audience. You may be used to thinking about the topic that you will investigate in 'content' terms; for instance, 'memory' or 'emotion regulation'. However, describing the topic of your research in these terms will not necessarily communicate its importance or relevance to an audience. To hook an audience, it is better to focus on the specific problem or need that your project will address. The worth and application of your research project will then be obvious, and no-one will need to ask: 'why would you do that?'

Using visual aids

Most presentations require some visual aids, such as a PowerPoint, Prezi, poster or handout. Well thought out visual aids can enhance your presentation and can help capture the audience's attention. Always ensure your visual aids are relevant, easy to read/see, well conceptualised and well formatted. Visual aids should be written using academic English with correct APA referencing.

Tips for using PowerPoint

Avoid having too many words on each slide as people will tend to read rather than listen. Use slides for key messages, quotes, examples, simple diagrams/charts and images. Aim to use one slide for every 1-2 minutes of talk.

- Use a maximum 10 lines of text per slide and aim for five or six lines where possible.
- Use size 32 to 36 font for headings and size 18 to 28 for the body text.
- Choose a professional design and colours. The templates under the 'Design' tab in PowerPoint contain some good options.
- Avoid using animations, sound effects, flashy graphics and distracting backgrounds; this detracts from what you are saying.

Handling question time

Question time is the opportunity for audience members to clarify issues or gain more information from your knowledge on the topic. You won't be able to give every detail of your research project in your presentation, so question time allows you to expand on points that were not completely developed.

There are different types of questions that may be asked. Some questions may indicate a gap or point of confusion in your talk, such as 'What is the relationship between...?'. Others will ask you to expand on a particular point or explain something in more detail, such as 'Could you say more about...?'. Some questions are asked because the listener missed a point or wants to check his/her understanding, such as 'What technique did you propose to use for...?'

Here are some tips for handling question time:

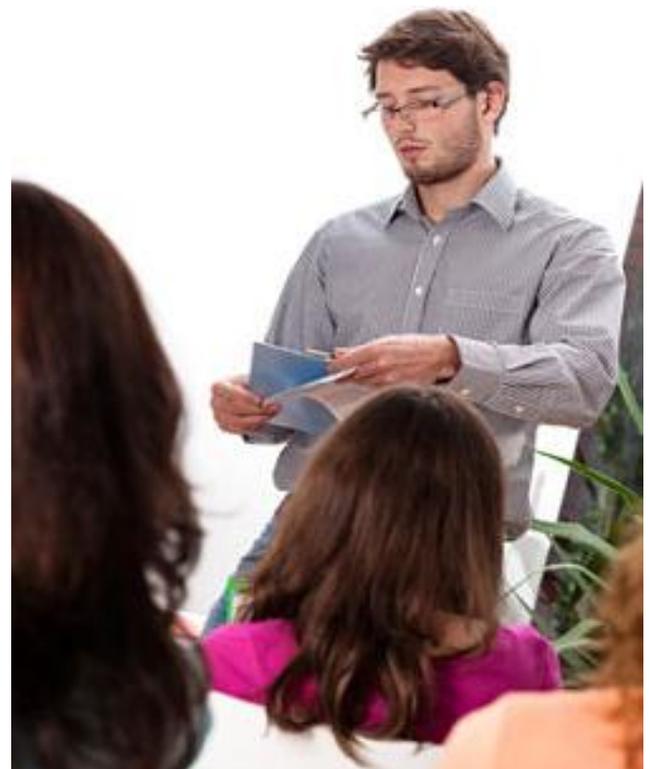
- Listen attentively. Paraphrase the question or ask for it to be repeated if necessary.
- Decide whether you are being asked an open question, which gives you the opportunity to expand and elaborate, or a closed one, which requires only restatement or clarification.

- Answer honestly and stay within the limits of your knowledge. Your audience will know immediately if you try to bluff.
- Remind your audience that the project is still in development. For example: 'I can't answer that question at this point in the research. I hope to have an answer in a few weeks' time...' 'I don't know. It's something I'll be looking into, so I'll have to get back to you on that one.'

At conference presentations you may also receive feedback and suggestions such as points you might like to follow up, studies or papers to read, a technique you might like to try. You can ask to talk to the questioner and discuss it further during one of the breaks. This not only increases your knowledge on the topic but could be an important networking opportunity.

Tip

Rehearse your presentation with fellow students and invite questions. Take note of the questions and consider whether the information elicited by the questions is so important that it needs to be included in the body of the presentation. Don't try to include everything, though.

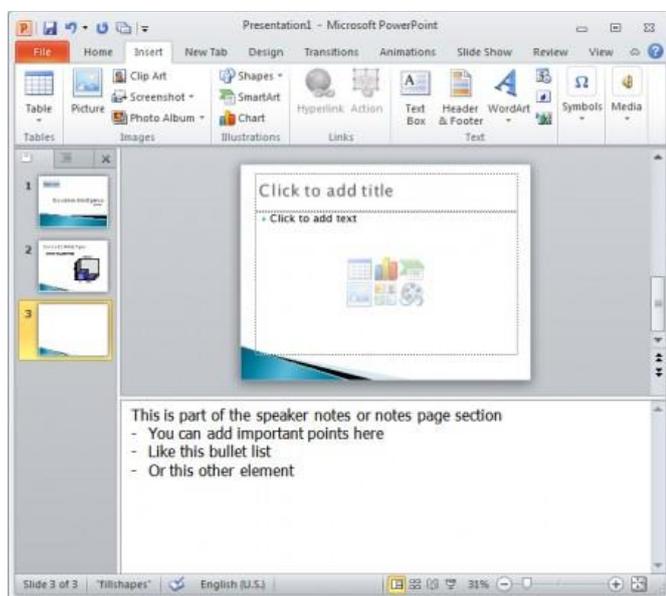


Delivering with confidence

Presentations need to be effectively delivered in order to convey your research in the most powerful way possible. Keep in mind the saying 'practice makes perfect' - few people can just get up to give their presentation cold and nail it. If you don't practice your presentation, you're certain to fumble and lose the interest of your audience. Don't feel like you have to memorise the entire presentation, in many cases you will be able to use memory prompts such as note cards or PowerPoint.

Notes

The audience will expect you to be thoroughly prepared, as shown by your minimal use of speaking notes to maintain a fluent delivery. Prepare some written notes to help remember what to say in the presentation but do so in such a way that you minimise the temptation to read and maximise the chance of speaking directly to the audience. Your notes should outline the main points only and you then expand on these as you present. You could use note cards, or you could also use the notes section in PowerPoint (see image below).



Eye contact

Remember to look up and try and make contact with at least two people in your audience. If you feel uncomfortable making eye contact, 'scan' the room without looking specifically at any one person or look slightly above the heads of the audience.

Voice and speech

You should deliver your presentation at a speed slower than your normal talking speech. This is necessary so that people can take in what you are saying and jot down some notes. Take a moment or two to breathe between each point. Practice your talk several times, going slowly and timing yourself. If it is too long, edit it down. Remember also to enunciate words clearly and project your voice so that all the audience members can hear without straining.

Body language

Choose a position so the audience can see you easily and stand confidently when delivering your presentation. During your presentation, keep movement to a minimum and avoid swaying and fidgeting. Try to not turn your back on the audience to read the slides behind you.

Attire

Dress appropriately for your presentation, as your clothing can enhance or detract from your speech. For most presentations, smart-casual is appropriate, but in some cases, you may be required to dress more formally.

Note: Information on this page has been adapted from: Turner, K., Ireland, L., Krenus, B., & Pointon, L. (2008). *Essential academic skills*. Oxford University Press.

