

Preparing your presentation

The most important thing is to know who you're going to be speaking to. This will inevitably influence what you say and how you pitch your presentation. Find out how many people will be on the panel, their status, their expertise, any knowledge levels you can safely assume, and whether they know each other.

This information is vital in helping you pull together the right amount of material, pitching it at the right level, and ensuring you have enough supporting materials to hand. Once you've established these details, you can get to work on the all-important structure.

Getting the right structure

You should always have one clear message that runs through your presentation, and limit yourself to three sections: introduction, development of your argument, and summary. Any more than that and your presentation will lose focus.

Develop a powerful introduction and close, as these are the times when your audience will be most attentive. Ensure that your ideas are clear and come in a logical sequence, using sentences that are short and to the point. When calculating how much time to devote to each section, allow 10-15% for your opening, the same for your conclusion, and the rest for the main content.

A clear delivery

Keep your opening punchy and have a memorable ending that will leave your audience on an upbeat note. Speak slowly and with purpose; avoid rambling or making digressions. Make regular eye contact with members of your audience, rather than allowing your gaze to drift vaguely round the room or over their heads.

Try to learn your presentation by heart. It will save you having to fumble around with prompt cards or PowerPoint slides and will give an excellent impression of your confidence and professionalism. However, you choose to present, practice your presentation beforehand, testing it on friends or family if you have the chance.

Visual aids

Most of us have experienced 'death by PowerPoint' at some time - that sinking feeling that comes from seeing 'slide 1 of 60' up there on the screen, or staring at densely-packed slides as the presenter reads the text out word-for-word.

Have mercy on your audience and improve your chances at the same time. Maximum content should be a headline and perhaps three or four bullets per slide with graphs and diagrams where appropriate. It should be there to help emphasise what you're saying, not to take the focus away.

Don't start the slides before you have first addressed your audience. They don't want to be distracted by what's on the screen while you introduce yourself and what you're going to say. As you progress through your presentation, give your audience time to digest what's on each slide before you begin talking again.

Flashy animations may show your technical expertise but can cause major problems in distracting your audience and confusing you when it comes to pressing the button in the right places.

Avoid glancing down at the screen for prompts – if you've learnt your presentation properly, you won't need them – and talk to your audience, not your laptop. Always make sure any projection equipment is working properly and try to get set up and ready to go before you are asked to begin.

Taking questions

Dealing with questions gives you the opportunity to further demonstrate your knowledge of your subject. Let your audience know in advance that you will be willing to take questions at the end, so they don't disrupt the flow of your presentation.

Take your time to answer, be ready to defend yourself and don't argue with a questioner. If you do come up against a conflict of opinions, don't try to win the battle – search for a good compromise position. Inviting other questions or views from the other members of the audience may help you diffuse a potentially prickly situation.

Answer the question you have been asked, not the one you fancy answering. Repeat each question as you receive it and give yourself a moment to consider what is actually being asked. If it is a loaded question that's inviting you to say something you'd rather not, diffuse it by reinterpreting it in a less pointed way, or ask your questioners to expand on what they mean.

Finally, enjoy it. It's a great chance to shine!