

Assignment Types: Presentations

Managing nerves



1. Prepare

Know your audience

Think about your audience before your presentation. The more confident you are that you are presenting them with useful and interesting material for them, the less nervous you will be. You really don't want your presentation to be a surprise. If it is, you lose complete control over the audience's reaction and that is a large factor in nervousness. So:

- Define who your target audience is
- Ask people who will be representative of the audience what they expect from the presentation
- Run your presentation plan by a few people to see if they think something is missing or is overkill
- Consider contacting participants by email beforehand and asking them a few questions about what they expect
- Greet audience members at the door and do a quick survey of why they are there and what they expect.

Know Your Material

Nothing is worse for nerves than trying to give a presentation on a topic you are not well prepared for. This doesn't mean you have to be an expert beforehand, but you'd better know it backwards on presentation day.

Another important point to remember is that you can't possibly cover everything you know in the time available. So focus on the most pertinent points and then supplement with other material if time allows.

Engage your audience

To make your material interesting and memorable, include occasional questions to the audience to encourage audience participation. This enhances the learning experience and gives you a break from presenting. It also allows you deliver your information in a more conversational manner which is often more believable.

Structure Your Presentation

A common technique for trying to calm nervousness is memorizing what you intend to say. But all this does is make you sound like a robot. If you miss a word or draw a blank, your whole presentation is thrown off and then your nervousness compounds itself. It is far better to structure your presentation so that you give yourself clues to what is coming next.

- Have a set of key phrases listed on a cue card
- Refer to these phrases to trigger your mind as to what is coming up next
- If you are using slides, use these key phrases in your transitions.
- This approach helps you control your own uncertainty about whether you will remember what you want to say and the order you want to say it.
Tip: A simple, widely used, and highly effective structure is to tell the audience what you're going to say, then say it, and then recap what you've said.

2. Practise, practise, practise

Although you should avoid memorizing your presentation, you do want to be very comfortable with your delivery. Familiarity brings confidence, and practice helps you to deliver the words naturally. This means they will be coming more from your heart and mind, rather than from a piece of paper.

- Learn the organization and order of your presentation
- If you do feel the need to memorize, limit it to your opening. This will help you get off to a smooth start
- Try videotaping yourself. You will see what you look like to others and then you can make a plan to change the things that need changing
- Use audiotape to listen to how you speak, your tone and your speed, and adjust appropriately
- Prepare for large speaking events by practising with a smaller audience first; for example, by inviting colleagues to listen to a dry run during their lunch hour.
- Resolve pronunciation issues (multisyllabic words, phonemes you have trouble with)
- Decide what you are going to wear - make it comfortable and appropriate
- Arrive early and get your equipment set up
- Anticipate problems and have backups and contingencies in place in case something doesn't work, you forget something, etc.
- If possible, give everything one last run through in the real environment
- Prepare responses to anticipated questions. Try to think like that one person in the front row who always tries to trip the presenter up.

3. Calm Yourself from the inside

Nervousness causes physiological reactions which are mostly attributed to the increase of adrenaline in your system. You can counteract these effects with a few simple techniques:

- Practise deep breathing – adrenalin causes you to breath shallowly. By breathing deeply your brain will get the oxygen it needs and the slower pace will trick your body into believing you are calmer. It also helps with voice quivers, which can occur when your breathing is irregular.
- Drink water – adrenalin can cause a dry mouth, which in turn leads to getting tongue-tied. Have a glass of water handy. Take sips occasionally, especially when you want to emphasize a point.
- Smile – this is a natural relaxant that sends positive chemicals through your body
- Use visualization techniques – imagine that you are delivering your presentation to an audience that is interested, enthused, smiling, and reacting positively. Cement this positive image in your mind and recall it right before you are ready to go on.
- Press and massage your forehead to energise the front of the brain and speech centre
- Just before you start talking, pause, make eye contact, and smile. This last-moment of peace is very relaxing and gives you time to adjust to being the centre of attention.
- Speak more slowly than you would in a conversation, and leave longer pauses between sentences. This slower pace will calm you down, and it will also make you easier to hear, especially at the back of a large room (when you are nervous you speak more quickly than you think, so aim to speak more slowly than usual – especially if you have pronunciation issues)
- Move around during your presentation. This will expend some of your nervous energy.
- Stop thinking about yourself. The audience is there to get some information and it is your job to put it across to them. It's not all about you!

Source: Dianna Podmoroff,
<http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/PresentationNerves.htm>
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