Giving Oral Presentations

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Introduction

In many geography courses the main form of assessment is the traditional essay or written work of some form. However, an increasing number are using oral presentations. This skill is needed in many professions and vocations and is seen as increasingly important by employers. Employers do not want someone who can just write essays, but someone who can communicate in writing and orally. Your tutors, therefore, will want to encourage you to become more skilled and successful verbal communicators. In this way you will be better geographers, and certainly better graduates, whatever your future career interests may be.

Oral presentations may be used in a variety of ways. In some courses, lecture topics may not be delivered by the tutor, but by you, the students (in such cases your tutor will normally help by providing you with some back-up in the form of handouts and reading lists). Alternatively, you may be asked to give a presentation on a topic within a seminar. In other cases, you might be asked to report on projects, fieldwork or other work you have done. In each case you will be asked to work either on your own, or in groups, to prepare the material and to present the information to the rest of the class. Such sessions can reduce the time your tutor spends marking written work—time which can be much better spent providing you with individual advice and feedback on the work you have done. Despite this advantage, standing in front of your fellow students and giving a talk, often with a tutor looking on, can be unnerving. You will almost certainly be nervous the first time you do it (and probably the second time too). It is always helpful to remind yourself that your tutors are probably nervous when they give presentations too! However, there are a number of tips which may help to solve the problems.

What Can You Do to Ease the Pain?

Because oral presentations may take several forms—some more formal, some less formal—an initial question you might ask yourself is: what style do I need to adopt? Whatever type of presentation you are expected to make, you should also ask: what makes a good presentation? What is the audience (e.g. your tutor, your fellow students) looking for when you make the presentation? A number of points are worth considering.
• What is the **objective** of the presentation? As with any other piece of work, this question needs to be asked first. You need to identify the type of presentation. What is the presentation for? What are the assessment criteria? Am I supposed to present information and/or develop an argument? The answer to these questions will determine the way you proceed.

• The **content** needs to be determined. What do I need to say? Has everything been covered properly? In most cases presentations need to be as highly planned as possible, even the less formal ones! To do this, you need to start working on the topic as soon as possible. If you start early, it will give you the chance to speak to your tutor about your plan for the presentation. This skill is essentially very similar to writing an essay—you need to make sure that you are identifying the right material and asking the right questions.

• **Organise** your work. Prioritise tasks and ensure that they are completed by a deadline. This can be achieved by using a planning sheet. If working in a group, this will involve group consultation and organisation (see Vujakovic *et al.*, 1994). Good organisation can also involve reading as much of the relevant information as possible and deciding on the plan of the session, including the timing.

• **Know** the information thoroughly yourself and prepare thoroughly. This helps you to be confident and relaxed. As with any type of work, the more you prepare the better the end result is likely to be, but do remember that over-preparation and stuffing too much into the presentation can prevent you from being relaxed. Make sure you select your information carefully! However, the work still needs to be precise, accurate and of a high standard. If you feel confident in what you have done, you will feel more confident in presenting it to others. Try to find time for a practice run through to check the timing and flow. Use other students as a trial audience and be prepared to do the same for them.

• **Contact** needs to be established and maintained with the audience. How do you make sure that people will listen? A good ploy here might be to start by grabbing their attention with something controversial or amusing (e.g. use a cartoon). You could ask them a question, or get them to vote for or against an opinion. It also helps if you state at the beginning of the presentation where you are going (perhaps verbally, or by using an overhead projector). This helps the audience know where you are and how much longer you are likely to go on. It always helps the listeners’ concentration if you can show that you are moving forward.

• Although the material may be written out partially or in full, you should try to avoid **reading** to the audience. You should, as far as possible, look up and maintain eye contact with your audience. This enables you to identify if, or when, a point has not been understood, or if it was missed. It also helps to give the audience the feeling that they are involved. While in some (rare) situations reading will be necessary, you must still maintain eye contact. The key here is practice, so that you almost ‘know your lines’ without having to read them.

• When talking, **vary the speed** and **alter the intonation**. It can also help to repeat important points in several ways to ensure that you get them across. However, repeating the same words does not always make anything clearer (a potential problem if you read). Try to restate the information from another angle, for example with a case study or with a quotation (which you can also show on an overhead transparency). Your voice must be clear and loud enough so that the audience can hear everything that is said. A garbled or quiet message is rarely understood. Emphasis can be given with movement. While you should not move about too much
because it can be distracting (e.g. avoid waving your hands about wildly), some movement shows your enthusiasm and can generate interest for the audience.

- It will help to have important points on *overhead projections (OHPs)*. Words, tables, diagrams or graphics on OHPs, or any other form of visual aid, will need to be **large** and clear when projected. Using normal typescript on an OHP usually means that anyone at the back cannot read it. A useful rule is no more than six **large** words on one line. In some circumstances, the use of cartoons, diagrams and colour may help your audience to remember your message. Using OHPs can help reduce your notes and prevent the need for you to read. They also allow you to face your audience, although you should always check the screen to make sure it is projecting correctly. But do be careful: too many OHPs or overfull OHPs can swamp the audience. Don’t put all your information on them—select! You may wish to arrive at the class a few minutes early to check that the OHP or any other facility is working correctly and that you know how to use it properly.

- Oral presentations by individuals often last between 10 and 30 minutes, although a group presentation may last for up to an hour. However long the time allocated to you, this should be adhered to. *Keep to your timing* and don’t overrun. One common problem is that you may feel the need to use all the information that you have—even if it is not fully relevant. This will not help your presentation (or your mark) and you will bore the audience. Over-running shows poor planning. Be aware that you cannot be expected to know everything about the topic. You certainly cannot get everything across in 10 minutes! Like a good essay, a presentation must draw out the key points and then select a few examples or cases to illustrate them. Check the key points against the objectives of the presentation.

- Try to keep **jargon** to a minimum. Some technical or subject-specific terms may be unavoidable. If specialist terminology is needed, then provide a succinct definition; a handout can help to do this. You need to be aware of the academic level of your audience. Don’t pitch your discussion at too high, or too low, a level—you do not want to cause frustration or confusion, nor do you wish to patronise them.

- Oral communication is **not** just for the person presenting the information. It is a two-way interaction. The message needs to be **received**. This is partly a function of clear messages being sent, but also a function of the ability of the audience to understand the message. In some cases it may be necessary for you as the presenter to **check** that the message has been received. You might ask the audience questions at the potential point of misunderstanding, at a convenient break in the presentation, or during a discussion following the presentation to ensure that they have understood.

- In some cases the audience will ask you **questions** to confirm they have understood either during and/or after the presentation. Whether questions are a formal or an informal part of the presentation depends on the situation. However, they are normal and are not intended to intimidate. Do not be afraid if questions are asked—at least it means that the audience is paying attention! Always try to answer such questions, but always be prepared to own up if you don’t know the answer. A useful tactic is to turn a question back to the audience— Involve them! In addition, don’t be afraid to ask questions when you are on the receiving end of a presentation.

**How Might a Presentation be Marked?**

Not all student presentations will be marked, but where they are the method of marking may vary widely. Most tutors will provide the assessment criteria at the outset to help
establish the objectives and guide your preparation. It is worth being aware of some of the criteria which might be used, as this will enable you to plan a better presentation. Assessment might involve some of the following methods.

- **Self-assessment by the individual(s) doing the presentation.** This may be used to get you to be self-critical of what you have done. You will usually know when you have done enough work and have organised your time effectively. If you are to improve your ability to talk in front of others, you need to know what you were doing wrong. If you can identify those faults yourself in advance, then you are most of the way to solving the problem. To help you do this, you could use your practice run-through as a starting point. You could also draw up a list of what you thought were positive and negative aspects of your presentation immediately after the session. This can then be compared with your tutors’ comments and be used as a basis for discussion.

- **Assessment by the student audience (peer assessment).** It is critical that you realise that giving a presentation is not a one-way process. It is useful to know what the audience thought of your presentation. Members of the audience are a good source of helpful criticism. It may seem hard to take at the time, but it will help to develop your skills. Did you talk too fast? Were the overheads clear? Was the presentation organised properly and clearly? Was it at the right level? This sort of information can help to improve your next performance! Again, a mock run-through can help.

- **Assessment by the tutor.** It is common practice for your tutor to mark the presentation. The tutor has the experience and expertise to assess the academic content much more accurately and dispassionately. Again, your tutor will normally offer the assessment criteria early on so that you can think of how your planned presentation ‘measures up’.

- **A combination of these three methods may be used.**

### What Might an Assessor Look for when Assessing Presentations?

We have already suggested that one of the first questions you should ask when giving an oral presentation is: what makes a good presentation? This is the same question which an assessor (you, your peers and/or your tutor) will be asking when thinking about a mark. However, because there are a wide number of different types of presentation, different tutors will almost certainly look for different abilities when assessing oral presentations, and no rules can be given which will apply in all situations. If your tutor gives you a list of assessment criteria he/she intends to employ, use them to think critically about the presentation you are preparing. The questions an assessor may address in order to reach an objective assessment cover the presentation skills and the academic content.

#### Presentation Skills

- Has the presenter gained the audience’s attention?
- Are the objectives clearly stated, and achieved?
- Is the presentation carefully planned, well structured and organised, including the timing?
- Is the communication well paced, clear and effective?
- Could notes be taken easily?
- Are explanations clear?
- Is the presenter verbally fluent? Is intonation varied?
• Is the presenter simply reading the information in a manner suggesting poor preparation?
• Is eye contact maintained with the audience?
• Are OHPs used skilfully? A number of sub-questions might be asked here: Are they large enough to be seen properly? Do they clarify the point and reduce confusion? Are they simplified to illustrate the point or are they too complex? Are they left up for long enough to be interpreted/used?
• Is the presenter confident with the material?
• Are questions confidently answered or is the presenter uncertain?
• Is the presenter enthusiastic?

Academic Content

• Has the right material been selected for the presentation? Is it all relevant?
• Is the vocabulary appropriate and pitched at the correct level?
• Is there clear evidence of appropriate reading? (This might ask whether enough reading has been done, or whether the reading is up to date!)
• Are the main issues made clear?
• Is the information given precise, accurate and of a high standard?
• Is the information put into a broader context?
• Does the presenter understand the subject-matter and does an in-depth knowledge shine through?
• Are examples used sensibly to illustrate the points?
• If relevant, are areas of contention identified?
• Is there evidence of an analytical approach to the information presented?

It is important to recognise that many of these questions will not be relevant to all types of presentation.

What Advice do Students Give about Oral Presentations?

While students frequently worry about giving presentations, most recognise their importance. The comments given below have been made by students. They are direct quotations and do not come from tutors! It is interesting to note that most are identical to those which any tutor is likely to give you. You should learn from these.

The presentation
• “Start preparation early and don’t leave till the last minute.”
• “Speak slowly”, and “Never read, since this will result in material being delivered too fast”.
• “Know your material”, and “Make sure you understand what you are talking about”.
• “Don’t be intimidated by others.”
• “Run through the presentation beforehand.”
• “Don’t worry if you make a mistake”, and “Don’t panic”.

For Presentations Which Have Been Done in Small Groups, Comments Also Include the Following
• “Most important is group organisation.”
• “Meet several times to ensure that all problems are solved (you may need to sacrifice a lunch time or two!!)” and “Plan and practise as a team”.

• “Before the first meeting, read as much as possible since familiarity with the material gives confidence.”

• “If one person does not do their part, the whole group falls apart. You need to be able to cover for others, who may be absent on the day.”

• “Communicate with each other.”

Conclusion

Giving oral presentations as part of your degree studies will develop your ability to:

• speak to a wide range of audiences (verbal communication);

• organise your work discipline—i.e. decide which information is necessary/unnecessary;

• organise your time to select what is necessary to learn and not waste time, and to present your material within the specified time and in the required detail;

• defend your views in a reasoned way (even if the views you have to present don’t agree with your personal feelings);

• contribute to discussions willingly and confidently;

• respond to the reasoned ideas of others (whether they are the tutor’s or those of other students);

• make an objective assessment of other presenters as well as yourself.

Do not see oral presentations as something to be endured—see them as a learning experience and something which can be enjoyed. The main points are:

• Preparation and cooperation lead to confidence, allowing you to relax and enjoy the presentation.

• If you are well prepared, it shouldn’t be too bad. It’s not as bad as it seems!

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REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


A useful text which identifies a wide range of tips for students on a large number of topics is: RACE, P. (1992) 500 Tips for Students (Oxford, Blackwell).