

Verbal and nonverbal communication

This week we will focus on presentation skills. Our communication and presentation of information can only be successful and effective if we manage to capture our listeners and select a suitable way of communication.

At the completion of the module you should:

- be able to put together the structure of a scientific presentation,
- be able to describe the individual parts of a presentation and carry out the individual steps resulting from the parts,
- be able to choose adequate presentation tools,
- be able to adjust both structure and content of the presentation, as well as your verbal and nonverbal communication to the needs of the listeners

Key concepts

introduction, the main message and conclusion, discussion and handling objections, language and rhetorical skills, nonverbal communication, stage fright

Content

1 Introduction

Our communication (presentation of information is also a kind of communication) can only be successful and effective if we manage to capture our listeners and select a suitable way of communication.

On the following pages we will be concerned mainly with public presentations, such as conferences, lectures, or presentations - our study material will guide you through the basic rules of presentation skills and their application in everyday practice.

A public presentation, or in other words, a self-presentation in front of other people, is often a difficult task - as anyone who has ever tried very well knows. The following material is a guide on how to **prepare yourselves adequately**, how to put together an adequate and catching presentation, how to minimize the risk of “something” going wrong; to a certain degree, it may reassure you that everything is as it should be.

Nevertheless, by mere reading the material, your presentation skills will not improve automatically, of course, your self-confidence will not increase of its own accord, and stress related to public appearance will not disappear; you can only improve your skills **with practical experience**.

A natural and effective presentation is, with rare exceptions, usually the result of your own experience, and this material can only help you **facilitate and shorten your way to the desired level** - you have to put it into practice yourselves... and I wish you good luck.

2 Key steps towards a successful presentation

2.1 Basic presentation structure

If you want people to remember what you are going to present, it is advisable to stick to the following plan:

After an introduction, in which you explain the aim of your presentation and your motive, if possible, you will proceed to the main body, which is the most important part.

In this part you will present your opinions, share information, discuss, explain, summarize important points, and argue. **The main body must have a clear and well-arranged structure**, while its individual parts must logically follow each other - if possible, the relations between the individual parts must be clear to all listeners - and you must logically proceed from one idea to the next. If you do not do this and get yourselves lost in the topic (about which you probably know more than most people present), i.e. you will jump from one point to another, you will probably be the only person who will know what you are talking about. The audience will be confused, get only fragmentary information, and your presentation will be to no advantage.

At the end of your presentation, summarize its most important points. Repeat the information you want people to remember at least three times, every time in different words.

2.2 Presentation introduction

The introduction is a very important part of a presentation. The audience forms its own opinion on the speaker within the first 30 seconds; therefore, it cannot fully focus on the content. The introduction is thus an opportunity to build a relationship with the audience. It is a general rule that the smaller the audience is (and the more it knows about the topic), the shorter the introduction may be. It should never last longer than 10% of the whole lecture.

You should think of a suitable introduction only after you have completed a large part of the presentation.

What the introduction definitely should not look like?

- it should not begin with a forced joke
- do not fawn over the audience unnecessarily; you should deserve their praise
- do not begin with negative statements
- definitely do not begin by apologizing that you are not very well prepared etc.

At the very beginning, before you even start presenting, there is a difficult task ahead of you - **to get the audience's attention**. Some people will only be sitting down, some will be talking to their friends, reading materials, making phone calls etc.

This position is called “a rock in the sea”, and you will see that you will feel like that after a while.

What to do, then?

Of course it is not advisable to reproach the listeners. **Face the audience, stand up straight with your legs a little apart, keep your arms beside your body and do not move**. You can smile a little bit. A straight posture seems self-confident; moreover, you will be able to breathe more easily and your voice will sound surer. Do not start speaking, the audience will settle down soon enough. You may keep this posture throughout the presentation; however, remember that rigidity is not advisable.

When the audience settles down, silence will fall. It often happens that we cannot remember how to start. It is thus advisable to bring **notes, if possible in a hard folder**, which will contain the first two or three sentences and the main points written in large letters. If you suffer from stage fright, this should help you.

Do not forget to greet the audience and introduce yourselves. Then say the title of your presentation; it should be an interesting title which fits the issue and will capture the audience. As an introduction, you may use a quotation or an interesting statement in order to draw attention. Then you can briefly introduce the issue and outline the content and timeframe of your presentation. The time schedule is important above all with longer-lasting lectures, or trainings, which can often last all day. You will thus avoid questions such as “When will we have a break?”.

It is not easy to get closer to the audience, and not everyone manages to do so immediately.

Luckily, there are a few tips:

- do not underestimate the first impression - take care to dress appropriately etc.
- you should seem self-confident even before the presentation starts
- in order to relieve the tension, it is good to say something funny at the beginning, or put a direct question and ask for a loud answer.

2.3 The main message

The audience is the most attentive during the first 5 minutes of your speech, and at the end of it. This needs to be taken advantage of. It is thus advisable to emphasize the most important points at the beginning, and repeat them at the end. We can also use means of drawing and increasing attention during the presentation itself, which are mainly:

- **voice:** by changing our volume (turning our voice down or up), or via dramatic pauses, we indicate that we are about to say something important
- **speech:** various words can emphasize your utterance (e.g. “and now”, “pay attention”); you may also address the audience directly (“You, as students of medicine...”); you may express your emotions (“I was totally awestruck by this...”)

- **visual means:** a new slide, a new medium, a movement (a gesture, you can draw something on the blackboard), demonstration (directly on the audience - you borrow something from someone etc.)

If your audience is practically falling asleep, you can try other tools (even though it is not your fault that the people are tired, of course). **A sudden acoustic impulse** (a light punch on the table in order to emphasize an utterance), questions put to the audience, addressing a particular person (preferably before they actually fall asleep). If the audience is bored, however, it is only your fault. What can you do in such a situation? You can start omitting irrelevant information. **However, never admit that you see the audience is bored, and never apologize.**

How to handle interruption during your presentation? You can ignore it. If it is impossible, it is enough to nod or look at the person directly. This way you will show that you acknowledge the objection without the need to reply. Then you may briefly discuss the objection and return to your topic. If it is impossible to discuss the objection quickly, postpone it to a later discussion.

2.4 Conclusion

This part is often overlooked (e.g. for time constraints); however, it is irreplaceable. It may, that is, create a last impression. And the very well-known phrase “Thank you for your attention” is not enough. If you indicate that your lecture is coming to an end, the audience will again focus on you. You can thus **repeat the most important points, or start a discussion.**

After you announce that your presentation is coming to an end, you should not speak longer than 2 minutes. Summarize everything you wanted to say and proceed to discussion which you may delimitate beforehand. Say e.g. “*I suggest that we only discuss this and that...*”. If the discussion is not going well, you may put a question (which you might have prepared in advance) to yourselves, e.g. “*People often ask me...*”, “*Perhaps you would like to ask...*” etc. Always direct the discussion both by speech and gestures (e.g. point, ask particular people to reply). End the discussion, summarize its outcomes and thank the audience for the discussion. Always thank in a concrete way (for a discussion, for suggestions...), **never thank the audience for patience. That would be disregarding your work.**

3 Discussion and handling objections

Now we know how to introduce the discussion. Tell the listeners how they can ask to be allowed to speak (politely) and insist upon a certain discipline. If possible, organize the discussion and call the people by names (in this case you have to ask all of them in turn, or else someone might be offended). You should ensure that everyone takes part in the discussion. You should show by means of eye contact that your answer belongs to everybody. **It is advisable to repeat every question.** This way everyone will hear it and you will have more time to think of an answer. You can also reformulate a negative question in a positive way.

Even objections may be understood as questions. Do not tell anyone “That is a great question!”; you would frustrate the other listeners. Do not answer questions which are beyond the area of your competence.

Solution tips in unpleasant situations:

- three questions in one - you should stop the person right after the first question; if it is impossible, answer whichever question suits you best
- **neverending question** - interrupt the person by saying: "Please formulate your question more briefly..."
- "Perhaps my question is stupid..." - say "Your question is not stupid at all"
- **unwelcome comment** - say "Thank you for your comment" and proceed to something else
- one of the listeners answers instead of you - reformulate and repeat the answer, step up close to this person (you will overshadow them), and at the end give your praise to them (saying their knowledge is good etc.)
- **some people start talking to each other** - address one of them and ask them to share the discussion with everybody
- **someone questions your facts** - let them tell you what exactly they question and try to defend your view (if it is impossible, promise to explain it in writing)
- if someone tries to force their opinion on you ("If I have understood you correctly...") - do not let them, reformulate the sentence and repeat your view
- **someone asks an absolutely stupid question** - try to reformulate it so that it fits into your concept
- not everything you may consider as a personal attack is actually an intended offense - view all questions and objections in a positive way.

4 Helpful tools making your communication effective

4.1 Language

While choosing the way of speaking, it is advisable to consider the level of the audience. You should always adjust your language adequately. E.g. a presentation for managers requires literary language in a conversational form, while a different audience (e.g. master mechanics) will welcome colloquial language, possibly with a few bad words. Different professions also use different forms of language - sometimes it gets so specific that normal people can hardly understand (press jargon, the language of politicians, public servants, business terms etc.). That is why we sometimes misunderstand politicians or public servants. They do not try to help us understand. **On the other hand, we will place emphasis on the fact that everyone understands our presentation.**

It is not advisable to use too many foreign words; either some people will be lost because they do not know the word, or worse, you will use a word in a wrong context, which will make you look stupid in front of those who do know the word. Dialect might also be unpleasant for the audience. Language is rich and there are many ways of making your presentation varied and interesting; you can work with your voice, expressiveness and intonation. **It is advisable to support your statements or arguments with suitable comparisons.** A suitably used comparison may turn a complicated statement into a statement which everyone will clearly understand.

People from different cities might not like to listen to certain accents, for example in Prague they do not like the Moravian way of speech/dialect, and vice versa.

4.2 Rhetoric in presentations

While presenting in public, the speaker should repress all disturbing factors of their speech; they might not perceive them themselves but such factors may disturb or even annoy the audience. These little mistakes draw the listeners' attention away from the content, and they may even discourage or irritate them.

Such mistakes frequently result from nervousness, which may be caused by a **lack of self-confidence** (e.g. because the speaker is not well prepared) or a simple **stage fright** (which is an irrational anxiety and fear even before the presentation starts).

We may make mistakes both in verbal and nonverbal communication, while the easiest part is usually the topic selection; we recommend beginners to do **regular rhetorical exercises** intended for relaxing the speech organs and achieving clearer articulation.

4.3 Optimization of verbal communication

Below we mention several tips how to impress the audience by means of your speech:

- use words such as YOU and say what the audience wants to hear, not what interests only you
- use the word I only with a specific purpose if you need to speak about yourself and it is important for reaching your goal
- replace abstract statements with practical and concrete examples
- do not use complex sentences (an average is approx. 15 words per sentence)
- use active, positive sentences (e.g.: "Use positive" instead of "Do not use negative"), it is a simpler way of information processing
- repeat your statements, the audience will remember them better
- speak loudly, with an adequate rate

There is no need to worry that if you pause to take a breath, the audience will consider it a failure (that you have forgotten the text etc.). On the contrary, you can **learn to use the so-called "dramatic pauses"** at the right moment. Such a moment may occur at the beginning before you start talking, or in case you want to draw attention to the projection screen, for instance. Or if there is a noise, e.g. something falls to the floor, you are manipulating with your materials or technical devices etc.

Technics in itself is one of the difficulties of verbal communication. It is necessary to learn to draw attention to the following slide. You always have to announce that you are going to move to the following slide; however, you should not say what the audience is going to see there. You may use sentences such as: "*What follows is...*", "*Let us think of...*", "*What consequences does this have?*" etc. By means of such words, we can also place emphasis on the following statement in advance. You have to finish saying such a transitional sentence before you move to the following slide. In case the change of visual tools takes a relatively longer period of time, you do not need to fill the pause with a verbal speech. You may give people a 10-second-long pause to allow them to process the information or think of a question you have posed.

When commenting slides, avoid statements. Rather use descriptions, ask questions, let the audience draw its own conclusions. **Never downgrade your presentation in advance** by saying for example: "*There is not much I want to tell you*", "*Most information will not be interesting to you*" etc. Avoid the use of the passive voice, conditionals and other neutral and impersonal phrases. E.g. "*It has been found out that...*", "*This might mean*".

4.4 Body language

If the body language does not correspond with what your mouth is saying, your speech will seem untrustworthy.

It is necessary to realize that the nonverbal component forms nearly three fourths of your speech. Even as you are going inside the room where you are about to present, remember to keep a straight posture. **And what about during the presentation - to walk or to stand on one spot?** It depends on what position you feel better in, and what the group of people is like. If the group is small, it is good to move; your presentation will seem dynamic and, on the whole, better. If you are in a large hall, though, it is not ideal to run around. However, if you walk from behind the speaker's desk from time to time, the audience will surely appreciate it.

Unless you have to, never sit during your presentation! And if you are saying something very important, do not move. Choose a suitable gesticulation to enliven your presentation. Everyone must see you at all times; therefore, the larger the room/hall, the more expressive your gestures should be (you should also gesticulate from your waist upwards).

There are **three basic rules** which may help you to a more natural nonverbal communication, relaxation and elimination of stress:

a) Positive attitude

A speaker must find a sentence (magical formula) which will induce a positive attitude in them before their public appearance. It may be the following: *"I am looking forward to my presentation."*, *"I am glad I am here with you."*, *"I am glad you have come."* etc. *It is good to repeat such sentences to yourselves before you start speaking aloud.*

b) Active eye contact

Too many sensory impulses (visual, above all) may stress you even more. Avoid looking all over the audience aimlessly. Always pick one person at whom you will look while talking about a certain idea, then move to someone else. Proceed **according to the M or W method** - find persons who look as if they are forming the tops of the letter M or W, and focus on them. If you manage this technique, your contact with the audience will be much better and you will seem calmer.

c) Body technique (calm and movement)

Before a presentation, your body gives you signals to run away, and therefore adrenaline flows into your muscles. This causes various unwelcome movements, such as shifting weight from one foot to the other nervously. What should we do to seem calm, and at the same time be able to let out the excessive energy?

You have to learn to **keep a firm posture and move in a controlled way**. A firm posture means that you are facing the audience, both feet are carrying the same weight, you are standing up straight with your head held high, your arms are free beside your body (or touching one another at the level of your waist), and you have a pleasant expression in your face. You can let out your energy by means of planned movements, e.g. towards the audience or the flipchart (blackboard...), towards the window (if you are talking about the weather).

You can also gesticulate (that is, move your arms). Your arms may serve as visual tools, or direct the audience to visual tools.

Stress may prevent you from **gesticulating** at the beginning, so you have to start gesticulating on purpose, or else it will later be unnatural. Your gestures should be directed upwards; this way your energy is released better and you will make a better impression upon the audience. Do not

use aggressive gestures, such as swinging your arms, pointing (this also applies to a pen or a pointing device). Avoid standing with your fingers stuck behind your belt, or with your hands on your hips; such gestures seem aggressive and defiant. It is necessary to change your mimicry during your presentation, otherwise you will seem boring to the audience.

A third possible energy vent is your voice. Speaking loudly will use up excessive energy, it will seem surer and everyone will hear you. You should speak to the last row of listeners. Remember that speaking loudly causes thirst; have something to drink with you.

4.5 Clothes and accessories

Your clothes and accessories also contribute to the final effect of your presentation. **The overall presenter's image** is really important because it affects their credibility, the first impression, and the degree to which the audience will be willing to listen to them.

It is often necessary to adjust your looks to your profession; if you are not sure what to wear, you should again consider **for whom you will present**. Your colleagues working on similar positions will probably welcome a slightly informal style; however, there is a general rule that you **should always be dressed a little bit better than your audience**.

Suitably chosen accessories will underline your individuality and emphasize your gestures. Their selection is a relatively sensitive matter, since people usually pay them more attention than you would expect. Neat hair and clean fingernails are a must; women should wear a decent make-up which will look natural. If you bring some materials (as you probably will), take care to choose a suitable graphic form, as well as a case in which you will carry them. For example, materials carried in a plastic bag could easily damage your first good impression.

5 How to handle stage fright

Stage fright is a natural physiological phenomenon. It occurs with a person who feels to be under pressure due to a current or upcoming situation. As a result, more adrenaline flows from the adrenal medulla, which will eventually help us handle the situation and do much better. A little bit of stage fright is always useful; nevertheless, you should eliminate anything that could possibly induce or increase stress situations.

Before a public appearance, it is advisable to be **perfectly prepared** in order to eliminate anxiety and stage fright - we will feel surer and we can tell ourselves we have done everything we could. Then we check the prepared presentation, all materials and tools, make sure that we know the correct time and place, etc.

You can increase your self-assuredness by means of repetition. The more often you present, the more experience you will have; this will boost your self-confidence and aplomb of your speech. We recommend you to have a firm posture and breathe regularly.

There is a **mental technique** to eliminate nervousness (a positive attitude and eye contact), as well as a **body technique**, discussed in the relevant chapter.

6 What to avoid

According to the so-called Mehrabian circle, 55% of the impression is created by nonverbal communication, 38% by the voice and 7% by the content (words).

The most frequent mistakes speakers make:

- they do not keep eye contact
- they pace nervously to and fro, or stand rigidly on the spot
- they speak too fast (or slowly, quietly)
- their speech is too monotonous
- they often look in their notes or even read them
- they play with their hands, pen, parts of their clothing, hair...
- they seem bored, uninterested (incompetent)
- parasitic, fill-in words (“hem”, “uh”, “you know”)