

Managing Nervousness during Oral Presentations

Introduction

Many students dread giving oral presentations in class, yet sooner or later students in most programs will be obligated to do so. If you perspire at the mere thought of giving a seminar, or even if you're comfortable speaking in front of a group, there are ways and means to improve both the quality of your presentation skills and your comfort with them.

Although this Study Skills Tip Sheet addresses only one aspect of presenting, many different skills are involved in a successful oral presentation, and they are all interrelated. For additional information, or for feedback and advice on maximizing your presentation skills, see the last section.

Causes and Cures

Some nervousness when speaking in front of a group is not only inevitable, it's also desirable. If it can be controlled, your nervousness can be translated into excitement or enthusiasm, and that makes for a presentation that is exciting and interesting to the audience. Excessive nervousness can take away any pleasure that doing the presentation may give you, but it may also have a negative effect on your performance. Learning more about the impact of nervousness (by reading this Study Skills Tip Sheet, for example) is an important first step to controlling any negative effect nervousness may have on your performance or your marks.

Choosing a Topic

A judicious choice of topic is equally, if not more, important in an oral assignment than in a written one. Your lack of interest or enthusiasm for the topic may lead to increased anxiety about your presentation and will probably be apparent to your audience in your voice, expression, and gestures. However, if you choose a topic which is fascinating to you, it will be difficult to bore your audience. Most importantly, your involvement with the topic on an intellectual and emotional level will help to focus your attention

on the material during the seminar, rather than on your own less than perfect presentation of it.

Preparation

Nervousness and fear of presenting can lead to a vicious cycle of procrastination. You put off working on the presentation because of fear of not doing well, yet the longer it is put off, the less time there is to prepare and rehearse. As your preparation time decreases, the pressure, stress, and nervousness associated with the presentation increase. Good time planning strategies can provide the preparation time essential for controlling nervousness. If you are confident in your knowledge of the material, and if you've planned enough time for rehearsal, you can face the presentation knowing you've prepared for a successful performance.

Rehearsal

You can manage nervousness by using effective rehearsal strategies. Your performance probably won't improve much without constructive feedback, so reading your presentation in front of a mirror has limited benefits. The better the feedback, the more quickly you'll improve, so consider using room-mates or family to provide constructive (and compassionate) criticism. Another strategy is to rehearse with equipment such as tape recorders and video cameras to allow you to review, and thus improve, your performance.

Time planning is important with presentations. You must have enough time to feel comfortable with any equipment or props you use in your presentation, and to develop your personal presentation "style" -- the tone and gestures which are natural and effective for you. The more you rehearse, the more comfortable you'll become with your presentation, and the less nervous you'll be.

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Performance Strategies

Regardless of your preparation beforehand, some nervousness is natural and inevitable. One performance strategy is to expect and accept nervousness. Rather than trying to stop your knees from shaking, let them shake, but realize that you can go on with your presentation. Musicians, athletes, and others who perform in public employ focusing strategies to control performance jitters. If, for example, your thoughts are on your sweating palms instead of on your material and its impact on your audience, then your audience may be attending to your nervousness as well. The strategy is to focus on one aspect of your presentation (for example, conveying your commitment to natural herbicides), rather than evaluating or criticizing yourself as you go. If you can occupy your own "inner critic" with something other than evaluating your performance and feeding your nervousness, then you can free your concentration and energy to accomplish what you've set out to do - demonstrate your knowledge, and educate or motivate your audience.

Want more information?

The Counselling Department and the Academic Success Centre are your best sources for advice and information on issues related to learning, studying, time management, and academic performance.

Workshops on learning, studying, etc., are offered regularly each semester by the Counselling Department. Please contact Student Services at Abbotsford – 604 854 4528 (B 214) or Chilliwack – 604 795 2808 (A 1318) to make an appointment.

Study Skills Tip Sheets providing information on many learning and time management topics, as well as writing and referencing, are available free to students. The complete range of Study Skills Tip Sheets is available on-line at www.ufv.ca/counselling/study/.

Links to Resources Elsewhere:

Presentation Skills:

1. "Preparing Effective Oral Presentations" at http://www.kumc.edu/SAH/OTEd/jradel/Preparing_talks/TalkStrt.html emphasizes scientific and academic settings for presentations.

2. "Dealing with Presentation Disasters" at <http://www.strategiccomm.com/disasters.html> is geared to the business world. There is some relevant information for an academic setting.

Designing Visual Aids:

1. "Designing Effective Visuals" at http://www.kumc.edu/SAHO/TED/jradel/Effective_visuals/VisStrt.html is an online tutorial aimed towards students and academics in scientific fields.

Other Relevant Study Skills Tip Sheets:

Collaborative Group Work
Concentration
Learning from Lectures
Learning from Textbooks
Reading and the Web
A Classic Method for Studying Texts: SQ4R

With thanks to the University of Guelph
Learning Services
The Learning Commons