

FEATURES SECTION

How to ... give a presentation

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Introduction

In the academic setting, the primary purpose of a presentation is to inform the audience as clearly and effectively as possible. We are all experienced recipients of presentations and know that this purpose is fulfilled with varying success. This is perhaps not surprising, since until very recently, tuition and formal advice on giving a presentation was extremely sparse within dentistry and medicine. This article is intended to give some guidance to the increasing percentage of those in any field of work who are invited and expected to give a presentation.

Before the Presentation

Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted. This venerable military wisdom is equally true for a presentation. There are some key steps.

Choosing a topic

This is clearly important. You may have been given a topic, a topic may have been suggested, or you may have a free choice. In any case, you will have room for manoeuvre and choice of material. Several factors are important. They inter-relate and will vary in relative importance, but all of these should be considered.

- Know your subject and have some views on the matter. This does not mean that you need be a world authority, but it is essential not to be starting from scratch.
- Have some illustrative or factual material 'to hand'. Either you have some of your own, or you know someone very well and very accessible who does.
- Know your audience. Are they undergraduates, post-graduate students, dental nurses, technicians, a lay audience, or a mixed audience? Be sure in your mind that the subject is one which is of interest and relevance to your audience.
- Consider the length of time available for the presentation. A topic may fit these listed requirements for a 10-minute talk, but not one due to last an hour.

Assembling material

- Think of the length of the presentation. The next steps are crucially dependent on time.
- Decide and write down your message list. This is analogous to the list of conclusions for a written paper. What do you want the audience to go away remembering? This step has three important purposes. Firstly, it is readily apparent if the number of items on the list does not fit the time available and needs editing. Secondly, this list makes it easier to think of the illustrative material required. Thirdly, it helps to ensure that the illustrations are exactly that—they are included to illustrate points and are not in themselves the point. An example of a misplaced illustration in orthodontics would be the inclusion of a clinical case because it has been highly successful, but which does not help to make a point on your message list.
- 'If in doubt, leave it out'—another adage that has achieved longevity for a reason better than just having a good internal rhyme. If you have three clinical cases which all make the same point, resist the temptation to include all three in detail. Perhaps only one should be included or an additional, but very brief sample of the other two. Some repetition is helpful in a presentation, but repetitive *illustration* of the same point can lose the attention of an audience and needs disciplined editing.
- Remember three major aims of an academic presentation:
 - (i) to inform—facts that are new to at least some of your audience;
 - (ii) to clarify—giving insight into familiar facts;
 - (iii) to organize knowledge—this frequently involves collecting facts from various sources and linking the facts to their consequences.

Ask yourself which aim is being fulfilled by a given bit of material. This may help balance the presentation for your audience.

Presentation style

An important choice to make at an early stage is whether the presentation will be read out from a script or whether the large majority of the words will be composed 'on the fly' with the aid of notes. If you plan to read a script, it will need to be written out clearly and in full. Reading a script is more suited to short talks, where time is particularly precious and rigorously policed, and/or if the presenter feels much more confident with all the material written down. A relatively early decision on this choice helps with the compilation of caption slides, which may well differ for the two styles of presentation.

Technical considerations

Almost all formal presentations are illustrated. Flip charts, whiteboards, overhead transparencies, projected slides and digital projection are the media available. (Audience-participation callisthenics routines with accompanying soundtrack are only for the most confident and outgoing performers). Flip charts and whiteboards are suitable for smaller audiences, and are particularly suited to interactive presentations and structured discussions. Overhead transparencies are quick and cheap to produce, and can be shown in almost any size of room. These virtues have their place, but it is easy for overheads to be physically clumsy, repetitive in style and visually wearing in a longer presentation.

Thirty-five-mm slides and electronic presentations are the best media for illustrating a presentation, with electronic presentations rapidly gaining in popularity. For excellent advice about the design of 'slides' for both media, readers are referred to the British Orthodontic Society website <http://www.bos.org.uk/>. In the members area, go to Committees-Development and Standards-Downloads and download 'A Guide to Better Slides and Computer Presentations'. This contains very clear and good advice, principally about the layout and content of individual slides. A frequent fault, well described in that document, is the inclusion of too much text in caption slides. Two more-recent pitfalls with the advent of electronic projection are pictures that are too small and excessively exuberant animation effects. The small picture size results from the temptation to squeeze previous double or triple projection material into what is, essentially, a single projection format. Illustrations, whether text or pictures, must not require effort to be seen. This means they must be sufficiently large. Over-exuberant animation is tempting because, like Everest, it

is now there to scale and explore, but it can be dangerously distracting, when a major object of successful communication is to focus attention.

It is clearly important to decide which medium to use to illustrate your talk. This choice will depend on the production facilities available to you and also those available at the venue for your talk. Checking the available projection facilities in advance is very good for the blood pressure. Converting a 50-minute triple projection slide presentation to a large audience into double projection presentation within the 20 minutes remaining prior to a talk requires a cool head. Electronic presentation material has brought its own cluster of potentially stressful glitches. These include corrupted disks, incompatible hardware and software. Checking in advance and having more than one electronic copy of the material are two stress-lowering moves. Readers of a script (see above) at party political conferences or at the opening ceremony of the American Association of Orthodontics Annual Session will additionally need to practice with the autocue and prepare for the standing ovation.

Giving the Presentation

Before you speak

Arrive early. Apart from any calming effect this has on you and the person responsible for the smooth running of the occasion, there are practical steps of importance. You should check the sound and projection facilities. If at all possible, have a guided tour of the podium, and try the knobs and switches. How many talks have you heard in which the first minute includes sentences such as 'How do I get the first slide?' 'Can we go back one slide please?' 'Can you hear me?' 'Is there a pointer?' Technical hitches happen to the best prepared, but even a brief reconnaissance can eliminate most of the above.

Make sure you can see your slides from the podium. If this is not physically possible, at least you will know in advance that you will need to cope with being unsighted or will need to roam to another vantage point at times. Remember the lighting will probably be dimmed. Can you see your notes? If you have a choice, then try to arrange for a lighting level (and temperature) that hinders loss of consciousness in the audience.

Starting the talk

Give the audience a 'map' to follow. A presentation shares some features with a journey. You are the guide,

and people are less likely to wander off and get lost if they have an early idea of the scope and direction of the talk. A bulleted list can be a good map and you can return to it at times to update the audience on their whereabouts in the presentation.

Focus attention

Any illustration has a point and this usually benefits from being pointed out by the speaker. Data in the form of tables, graphs, charts etc.—even if well constructed—are especially in need of a precise guide (see Figure 1). Explain what the axes of a graph are—‘this is Force and this is Time’. Clarify what the columns on a bar chart are—‘the red columns are the control group and the blue columns are the functional appliance group’. Given time and good visibility, the audience could probably work these things out for themselves, but there are two large potential drawbacks to leaving them to do so: firstly, time is precious and secondly, whilst they are straining to read the labels and understand the graph, they will not be listening to what you are saying. If you move on with some of the audience still working hard at deciphering the slide or not having listened, you will lose some of the attention you need to be a good guide. A small point here about pointers. A laser pointer is an excellent focuser of attention, but some people go in for the ‘demented firefly’ technique, waving it in a pattern of tangled wool over all their slides throughout the talk. Familiarity breeds contempt and the human eyeball soon stops following the dancing point of light.

Retaining or re-gaining attention

- Always know what is coming next. Almost all speakers will recognize the occasional feeling of significant surprise engendered by the appearance of their next slide, but at a less dense degree of amnesia, not knowing what is coming next frequently hinders the flow of the talk and loses the precious thread of attention.
- Be very sparing with family snaps, cartoons, and lovely sunsets as ‘filling’ slides – especially if you do not refer to them and talk about another slide on the wall at the same time (see Figure 2). Human beings in the audience will divert their attention to the picture and away from anything you say or show at the same time. Use a blank slide (‘dark slide’ is the correct



Fig. 2 Here is a fascinating picture of an Australian bullfrog that I am not going to refer to, but is here because I rather like it, and will also distract you from the other slide and from what I am saying.

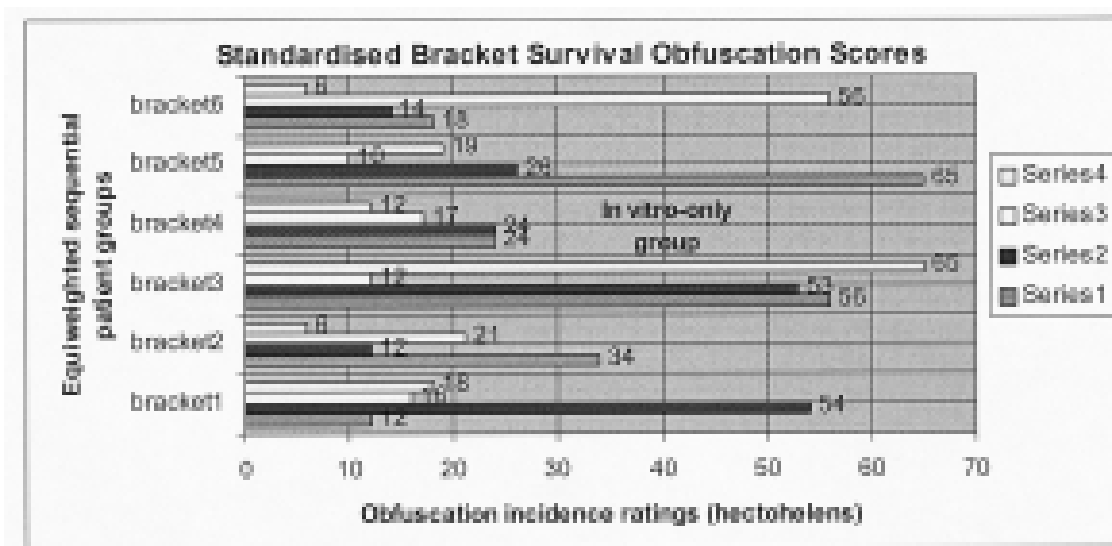


Fig. 1 Here is a bar chart with multiple columns, tiny or non-existent labels, and an obscure colour-coding scheme. You will not have time to decipher it but you can clearly see that it shows that Bracket X is the best.

technical term) – even the dullest verbal point is more interesting than looking at a black screen.

- In a longer talk, other useful re-gainers of attention include:
 - (i) a change in position of the speaker (a wireless microphone helps);
 - (ii) inviting questions;
 - (iii) asking the audience a question;
 - (iv) relating an anecdote as a ‘knights move’ jump of thought;
 - (v) returning to your ‘map’ slide.

Time keeping

Finishing early is never a problem. Running significantly over time has very substantial disadvantages:

- It is bad manners.
- You can lose all remnants of audience attention if you are competing with the coffee break or the bar.
- You risk being stopped in mid-sentence by the chairman.

Tips for good time keeping include those in the BOS document about the amount of illustrative material in the ‘A Guide to Better Slides and Computer Presentations’ referred to above. If possible, run through the talk out loud to yourself or to a trial audience, without pause or interruption. If this shows the talk to be too long, resist the temptation to hurry—cut something out. You will be the only one to miss what had to be removed and it is still there for another day. This can be hard advice to follow. Remember that failing to finish is a very disappointing experience for the speaker and for the audience

Finishing

Journalists and public speaking coaches will attest that, in terms of the lasting effects, the end is always important and often the most important part of a talk. In our context, the intention is to maximize recall of the content (politicians may have other priorities at the end of their speeches). Journalists will often finish an article with a reference to the opening sentence. In the academic context, a similar ploy is frequently effective in reminding the audience of the aims of the talk. If you started with a ‘map’ bullet slide, finishing with the same slide is a helpful way of doing this. Many speakers think carefully about their opening words, whilst too few give equal

thought to their closing words. Opening words are certainly important in gaining attention and setting out the aims of the talk, but they will usually be swiftly forgotten. Finishing words stand a bigger chance of lingering in the memory.

After the presentation

Answering questions

This is a potential worry for presenters with less experience or less confidence. In fact, there is rarely need to worry unless you strongly wish to appear infallible and omniscient. The following thoughts may be helpful:

- If you don’t know the answer, don’t worry; just say so.
- If the question makes you realize you may be wrong in some fact or opinion, then confess your possible error and compliment the questioner.
- If the question is ‘stupid’, be courteous and gentle. Remember, you have the high ground and probably the best microphone. A pyrrhic ‘victory’ is seldom satisfying.
- If the question is rude or aggressive, you are unlucky. Polite disagreement is a suggested attitude in response.

Retrospection

It is always worth making a few notes—mental or written—about what went well and not so well, and what were the possible reasons and remedies. A feeling of relief at having finished a presentation (and the potential celebratory libation) should not prohibit some constructive reflection at a fairly early stage. If you are in a training post, your trainer or tutor should be more than happy to be part of this process. Quiet enquiry of a friend who was present is also often helpful. Equally, the more experienced are never too old to learn. Those who are in the position of the friend or trainer should remember to start with positive comments about successful aspects, before mentioning areas for possible improvement. Confidence is an important asset and this is especially important to remember when you are helping someone to give better presentations in the future. (Over-confidence is not unknown, but thankfully more rare in relation to presentations). Another potentially helpful approach is to reflect on other presentations, especially ones that you thought were good. Ask yourself why you had this good opinion and try to find features that are generally applicable.

There is no single best way to give a presentation. Different styles can be equally effective. Similarly, any advice will work better for some than for others. The thoughts and tips in this article will be of varying usefulness and may exclude others of equal or greater merit. The tips are certainly given with a substantial seasoning

of humility and a disclaimer that the author may well not manage to practice what he has preached. Meanwhile, as the radio essayist said, 'if you have been, then thank you for listening' and if this was a presentation, then perhaps I would invite you to glance again at the first paragraph.