Universidad Simón Bolívar / Departamento de Idiomas

Inglés para Presentaciones Científicas ID–5124

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Presentation preparation guidelines

These guidelines cover the six key points of the course:

- Focusing
- Structuring
- Preparing visual aids
- Rehearsing
- Delivering
- Interacting with the audience

Focusing: minor questions

When is your presentation?

Note the date your presentation was scheduled for. Be ready to arrive before class time that day so you can test the equipment.

How long is your presentation going to be?

Presentations 1 and 2 are five minutes each (maximum), plus five minutes for questions. Presentation 3 is ten minutes (maximum), plus five for questions.

Where is your presentation taking place?

If you were scheduled for a Monday or a Friday, you'll give your presentation in Taller Audiovisual 1. Wednesday presentations will be given in Sala de Computadoras 1.

What equipment is available in these rooms?

Taller Audiovisual

This room has a computer, a video tape recorder, and an opaque projector connected to a multimedia projector. However, you can only use one of the three at any given time. The computer has PowerPoint, Word, Excel, and Internet Explorer.

You can also use the whiteboard if you wish, by rolling up the projection screen. If you bring your own markers, make sure they are the right kind. If you don't, the teacher usually has a set of appropriate markers. But any good speaker shouldn't count on someone else's resources for the success of a presentation. You should erase the whiteboard after use. If you don't have an eraser, a piece of toilet paper or kitchen wipes will do.

Feel free to bring any kind of visual aids: posters (bring your own tape to hang them), handouts (bring enough copies for everyone), props (real objects used as visual aids), etc. Remember that you are not confined to using PowerPoint and that often more traditional media can be used to an advantage. You could, for instance, print out your slides and project them via the opaque projector. You could also use overhead transparencies on this equipment, but they are expensive. You could even project a 3D object on the opaque projector.

Access to this equipment is granted one hour before class time on Monday. On Friday, though, we have access to the room at class time. Because of this, a half hour at the beginning of class will be for Friday speakers to test the equipment.

Sala de Computadoras 1

This room has several computers but only one of them has the PowerPoint Viewer, which allows your presentation to be viewed but does not allow editing. This computer is hooked to a multimedia projector, but there are no speakers, so plan for no sound effects. Although no computer in this room has either PowerPoint, Word, or Excel, all of them have Internet Explorer. In theory, this means you should be able to use the internet as a visual aid. However, doing so requires careful planning as well as a running internet connection. If the university's servers are down, and your presentation is fully internet–based, you will not be able to present. Please do not let this happen.

In this room you can also plan to use the whiteboard simultaneously with the multimedia projector if you wish. Again, bring the right kind of markers and erase the board after use.

If you plan to bring non–PowerPoint visual aids, you should favor posters, handouts, or props. However, you cannot bring overhead transparencies or paper printouts of slides because we cannot project them via the multimedia projector.
Access to this equipment is granted one hour before class time on Wednesday.

Focusing: major questions

Answering five major questions will give your presentation an appropriate focus, what some people have called 'scope.'

What —Topic

1. Choose a familiar topic. It can be something technical, scientific, managerial, or even personal. As long as it is familiar to you, you will be able to talk about it effectively.
2. If you have problems choosing a topic, brainstorm a list of possible topics. First list any topic that comes to your mind. After a few minutes of doing this, look at your list critically: you may jot down the pros (+) and cons (-) next to each item on the list. This will help you decide what topics NOT to talk about and your list will be reduced to maybe three or four topics with potential.
3. Examples of adequate topics:
    - your experience in an internship,
    - a personal hobby,
    - a personal experience in solving a problem,
    - a historical event,
    - your interpretation or application of a theory,
    - information about study or work opportunities,
    - information about a project you're working on,
    - etc.

Remember that at least one of the three presentations you give this term MUST be about a technical or scientific topic. Some people like to give "lighter" presentations first and save their technical one for last. Others just want to give technical or scientific presentations, and that is ok, too. (Some people find that it's more difficult to talk about everyday, non–technical events in English.)

4. If you are sure about your topic, you then can decide what scope you will cover. You will gradually do that by finding answers to other major questions.

Who —Audience

1. Remember who your audience is. Your audience is NOT the teacher. Your audience is made up of people like you.
2. Think about the following possible characteristics of your audience:
   - they are students in the last stage of their studies;
   - most of them are engineering students while some may be in a science major;
   - their average age is _____;
   - their probable interests include _____;
   - some of the problems they face are _____;
   - their knowledge of the topics on your list is probably _____;
   - they would most likely receive your topic in a _____ way;
   - they are probably familiar with aspects (a) _____ and (b) _____ of your topics;
   - aspects (c) _____ and (d) _____ of your topic are probably new to them;
   - etc.

Why —Motivation

1. Think about your motives for giving this presentation. Some adequate motives include:
   - I want to get a good grade.
   - I like to give oral presentations in Spanish. Doing it in English is a challenging opportunity.
   - I just love this topic so much, I need to share my passion for it with the class.
   - I believe that everybody in my class should know aspects (a) _____ and (b) _____ of my topic.
   - Everybody knows about this topic, but I can surprise my classmates by talking about a generally ignored aspect of it.
2. Remember that your motivation is private. You do not tell anybody your motivation(s), but you do well in knowing what moves you to do the talk —other than the fact that you have to do it because it is a course requirement.

3. Some motivations may directly lead to a presentation purpose, but not necessarily. More often than not, your motivation(s) will give you ideas to justify your purpose.

What for —Purpose

1. The purpose expresses your presentation goal. Write your purpose as a full sentence that features a goal–oriented —instead of a process–oriented— verb. The sentence may look something like this:
   - I'm here today to present two arguments in favor of _____.
   - I'd like to recommend a strategy for _____.
   - I will explain the steps needed for _____.
   - In this presentation, I will try to convince you that _____.
2. Unless you have a very ingenious strategy that counts on revealing your purpose gradually, or later in the talk, you will most likely say your purpose during the opening of the presentation. Therefore, you better give your purpose some good thinking time to make it clear an unambiguous.
3. If you are having trouble deciding what your purpose is, brainstorm a list of possible purposes for your topic. If you are still undecided about your topic, brainstorm a list of possible purposes for each of the most likely topics. Then look critically at the purposes you wrote.
4. Looking critically at your purpose list, you will be able to see how broad a coverage of the topic is required for each purpose. If a purpose says,

"I will demonstrate that the six methods currently used to dispose of chemical waste are inadequate."

you will probably not be able to reach that goal in a 5–minute presentation. 'Demonstrate' may be too strong a verb because it implies that you will be showing enough evidence against each of the methods. Also, six methods sounds like too many for the given duration. Perhaps you can rephrase the above purpose as,

"I plan to show you some evidence that the two most common methods used currently to dispose of chemical waste are inadequate."

You can later trim it down to,

"I plan to show you some evidence against the two most common chemical waste disposal methods."

Essentially, what you do when you look at your purpose list critically is that you examine the scope implications of each potential purpose. In this way, you can select the most realistic purpose on the list or write an even better one.

5. Do not forget the audience's concerns when you write your purpose. Let's say that you finally arrive at this purpose:

   "I would like to explain the steps for learning to windsurf."

The immediate questions you should ask yourself include, Why should your audience know these steps? Are they potential windsurfers? If someone hates the sea, what's in this presentation for him? If someone is an expert windsurfer already, will she be bored by your basic level presentation?
Do not become paralyzed by questions like the ones above. Think about how passionately you feel about your topic. You probably still want to explain the steps to learn to windsurf because YOU love to windsurf. But you do not want to impose your topic or your goal on the audience. You need to think further to identify elements in the audience's background that may justify your purpose. For example, although the audience may not necessarily learn about these steps, everybody needs recreation. If you can get the audience to consider windsurfing a recreation option, then your purpose acquires a relevance that gives your topic more pertinence. Any person in the audience will be able to appreciate your presentation because you're giving them information about this recreation option.
The expert windsurfer might find it interesting that someone is explaining the basic steps that she'd already forgotten were new to her once. She may even be fascinated by your simplified presentation of steps because she has been contemplating becoming a windsurfing instructor but has often wondered how to get started.
The guy who hates the sea doesn't need to be left out. For example, you can minimize his negative feeling toward your topic by acknowledging that some people do not like the sea but that you hope that the basic information you will give may motivate them to at least consider becoming a windsurf spectator. And, who knows, even these people may someday have a boyfriend or a girlfriend or a child who loves windsurfing. So why not give your topic a chance?

6. Two excellent sources (Gurak, 2000; Hager & Scheiber, 1997) offer a few basic technical presentation purposes:

- to inform,

- to instruct (i.e., to teach, to train, or to explain how to perform a task),
- to persuade (i.e., to convince),
- to sell, and
- to offer a strategy or action plan.

The verb you choose for your purpose will probably fit into one of these categories.

7. If you're going to do a lot of thinking on something, let that be the purpose. Your presentation pivots around it. Remember that "purpose controls content" (Perlman, 1998, cited in Gurak, 2000, p. 61). And I'd like to add that content suggests form.

How —Strategy

A well–focused presentation has a clear purpose which gives form to a realistic plan which can be successfully covered within the presentation time given. But before you write down an outline, decide on your overall strategy. This may imply that you'll have to do some research.

Hager & Scheiber (1997) list various organizational strategies that will later guide your presentation outline. They are:

- Chronological or sequential —Good for describing processes, telling a story, commenting on history, explaining instructions, and similar purposes/topics.
- Reverse chronology —Sometimes reversing the real order of occurrence of events can be successful.
- Classification or division —For example, explaining types of technology.
- Comparison or contrast —This requires a set of criteria so that the comparison/contrast is fair. For example, if you present the advantages of your proposal, you should also present the advantages of other proposals that you're comparing it with.
- Cause-to-effect —Ideal to explain scientific principles.
- Effect-to-cause —This is the same strategy of reverse engineering. You can use it to explain how a discovery or invention came to be.
- Familiar to unfamiliar —The name says it all: you start with something you are certain everybody in the audience shares and then build the new information over it.
- Geographical location —Some topics lend themselves to be organized geographically, as in, for instance, a presentation about product outcomes per region.

- Importance —Whether organized from most to least important or from least to most important, this strategy lends itself to describing research.
- Problem-cause-solution —Also called troubleshooting strategy, this strategy is aimed at presenting solutions to an crucial problem.

Which one of these is adequate for the purpose you have in mind? Don't forget that you're planning to talk about your topic to a particular audience.

Structuring

1. Now you are ready to organize what you are going to say. Write an outline to reflect your strategy, topic, audience needs, motivation, and purpose. Organize your outline in three parts.

- Opening
  - Attention getter:
  - Self introduction: _____
- Purpose: _____
- Plan: _____
- Development
  - Part 1: _____
    - Aspect 1.1: _____
    - Aspect 1.2: _____
  - Part 2: _____
    - Aspect 2.1: _____
    - Aspect 2.2: _____
- Close
  - Key idea(s) to list: _____
  - Purpose review: _____
  - Central message: _____
  - Memorable note: _____

2. Although not properly part of your structure, you would do well in preparing for the *questions and answers session* following the presentation. So, right after your outline, maybe you can write a brief list of questions that people are likely to ask. In this way, you are again thinking of

the audience and how your presentation is relevant to them. You will also get ready to answer potentially hard questions.

Preparing visuals

1. Look at your outline to decide which parts require support to enhance communication. Parts that contain complex ideas or that would better be illustrated with a visual than with words are in this category.
2. Remember Mitsch's (1991) four principles of good visual aids.

- Good visuals should be *relevant* (i.e., necessary to communication).
- Good visuals should be *clear* (i.e., explicit and purposeful)
- Good visuals should be *visible* (duh!)
- Good visuals should be *simple* (i.e., with a minimum number of elements)

3. For every visual aid you will need a specific purpose. If you do not have a clear purpose in using a slide, for example, don't use it.
4. Normally, authors recommend using about one slide per two or three minutes. This is due to the fact that, although the information is familiar for you, the audience needs processing time in order to digest it. This rule, however, can be broken if you decide to use several slides in rapid succession for a specific purpose. (By the way, this strategy can be effective in showing pictures whose details are of no interest but which put together quickly communicate a certain feeling or support an opinion.) So, the rule of two or three minutes per slide doesn't always work, especially for shorter presentations. On the other hand, you don't want to put too many visuals for the time available.

Rehearsing

1. In structuring your presentation you organized information in a certain way to fit your overall strategy. In order to make it flow smoothly, you should also make sure you use adequate language, especially for transitions and directing your audience's attention. Read the document called "Language forms" (see my web site) for ideas on language you can use.

2. Rehearse so your presentation takes a little less time than the time you have. For example, if you have ten minutes, rehearse so your time is nine minutes. In this way you will be safe in the face of various scenarios:

- your memory fails thus making you fall behind your plan;
- you like the topic so much that, in spite of all discipline, you sidetrack a little more often than possible;
- in the middle of your presentation, you suddenly realize that there is a better way of delivering certain information; you decide to run the risk of delivering it in this unrehearsed way and thus fall behind your original plan.

3. Rehearse, rehearse, and rehearse.

References

Gurak, Laura J. (2000). *Oral presentations for technical communication*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Hager, Peter J., & Scheiber, H.J. (1997). *Designing and delivering scientific, technical, and managerial presentations*. New York: John Wiley.

Mitsch, B.F. (1991). Use visual aids wisely. *Hydrocarbon Processing.* March.

