# Chapter 21: Oral Presentations

## Objectives

Upon completion of this chapter, readers will be able to do the following:

1. Plan an oral presentation that includes a clear purpose, situation, and topic, as well as an engaging introduction, a well-structured body with transitions, and a concise conclusion.
2. Develop and integrate at least one visual aid (such as slides, charts, or diagrams) into an oral presentation to enhance the audience’s understanding.
3. Deliver an oral presentation with appropriate timing, volume, and pacing, while minimizing verbal crutches and nervous mannerisms.
4. Recognize the importance of understanding and adapting to an audience in order to prepare and deliver an effective presentation.

## Introduction to Oral Presentations

A common assignment in technical writing courses—not to mention in the workplace—is to prepare and deliver an oral presentation. While employers look for coursework and experience in preparing written documents, they also look for experience in oral presentations. Recall in the first chapter, we stressed the importance of interpersonal communication skills in the workplace.

The following was written for a standard face-to-face classroom setting. If you are taking an online technical writing course, oral reports can be sent in as videos. Students may evaluate each other's oral reports by filling out a form like the one provided at the end of this chapter or responding through the discussion board.

With the help from the resources that follow, you can be a champion presenter.

## Topic and Situation for the Oral Presentation

For the oral report in a technical writing course, imagine that you are formally handing over your final *written* report to the people with whom you set up the hypothetical contract or agreement. For example, imagine that you had contracted with a software company to write its user guide. Once you had completed it, you'd have a meeting with chief officers to formally deliver the guide. You'd spend some time orienting them to the guide, showing them how it is organized and written, and discussing some of its highlights. Your goal is to get them acquainted with the guide and to prompt them for any concerns or questions. (Your class will gladly pretend to be whomever you tell them to be during your talk.)

As you can see, you shouldn't have to do any research to prepare for this assignment—just plan the details of your talk and get at least one visual ready. If you have a report topic that you'd prefer not to present orally, discuss other possibilities with your instructor. Here are some brainstorming possibilities in case you want to present something else:

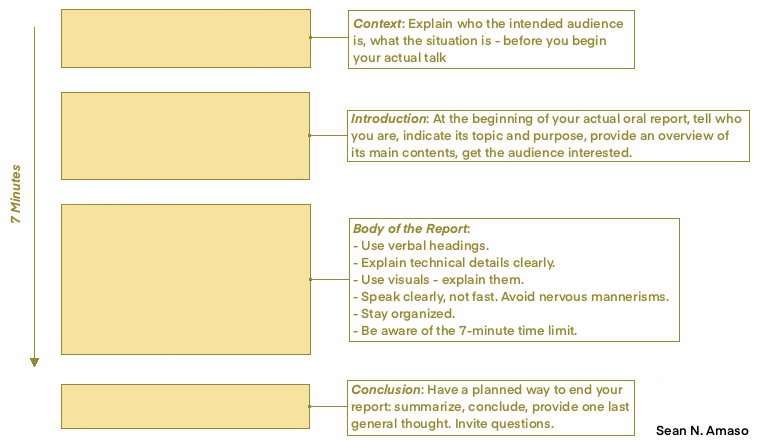
* **Purpose:** One way to find a topic is to think about the purpose of your talk. Is it to instruct (for example, to explain how to use AI to plan a flower garden), to persuade (to vote for or against a certain technically oriented bond issue), or simply to inform (to report on citizen participation in the new recycling program)?
  + *Informative purpose*: An oral report can be primarily informative. For example, as a member of a committee involved in a project to relocate the plant, your job might be to give an oral report on the condition of the building and grounds at one of the sites proposed for purchase. Or, you might be required to go before the city council and report on the success of the new city-sponsored recycling project.
  + *Instructional purpose*: An oral report can be instructional. Your task might be to train new employees to use certain equipment or to perform certain routine tasks.
  + *Persuasive purpose*: An oral report can be persuasive. You might want to convince members of local civic organizations to support a city-wide recycling program. You might appear before city council to persuade its members to reserve certain city-owned lands for park areas, softball and baseball parks, or community gardens.
* **Topics:** You can start by thinking of a technical subject, for example, solar panels, microprocessors, drip irrigation, or laser surgery. For your oral report, think of a subject you'd be interested in talking about, but find a reason why an audience would want to hear your oral report.
* **Place or situation:** You can find topics for oral reports or make more detailed plans for those reports by thinking about the place or the situation in which your oral report might naturally be given: at a neighborhood association? at the parent–teachers' association meeting? at a church meeting? Thinking about the place or situation makes you focus on the audience, their reasons for listening to you, and their interests and background. As in all technical writing situations, identifying and understanding your audience is of the utmost importance.

## Contents and Requirements for the Oral Presentation

The focus for your oral presentation is a clear, understandable presentation and a well-organized, well-planned, well-timed discussion. You don't need to try to look like a professional actor. Simply present the essentials of what you have to say in a calm, organized, well-planned manner.

When you give your oral presentation, we'll all be listening for the same things. Use the following as a requirements list, as a way of focusing your preparations:

1. **Situation:** Plan to explain to the class what the situation of your oral report is, who you are, and who they should imagine they are. Make sure that there is a clean break between this brief explanation and the beginning of your actual oral report.
2. **Timing:** Make sure your oral report lasts no longer than the time allotted. Your instructor will work out some signals to indicate when the mark is approaching, has arrived, or has passed.
3. **Introduction:** Pay special attention to the introduction to your talk. Here's where you tell your audience what you are going to tell them.
   1. Indicate the *purpose* of your oral report.
   2. Give an *overview* of its contents.
   3. Find some way to *interest* the audience.
4. **Visuals:** Use at least one visual—preferably slides using presentation software (such as PowerPoint). Flip charts and objects for display are okay but avoid scribbling stuff on the chalkboard or whiteboard or relying strictly on handouts. Make sure you discuss key elements of your visuals. Don't just throw them up there and ignore them. Point out things about them; explain them to the audience.
5. **Explanation:** Plan to explain any technical aspect of your topic clearly and understandably. Don't race through complex, technical information. Slow down and explain it carefully so that the audience can understand it.
6. **Transitions:** Use "verbal headings.” By now, you've gotten used to using headings in your written work. There is a corollary in oral reports. With these, you give your audience a very clear signal you are moving from one topic or part of your talk to the next. Your presentation visual can signal your headings.
7. **Planning:** Plan your report in advance and practice it so that it is organized. Make sure you can pronounce all the words correctly. Make sure that listeners know what you are talking about and why, which part of the talk you are in, and what's coming next. Overviews and verbal headings greatly contribute to this sense of organization.
8. **Closing:** End with a real conclusion. People sometimes forget to plan how to end an oral report and end by just trailing off into a mumble. Remember that in conclusions, you can
   1. *Summarize* (go back over high points of what you've discussed)
   2. *Conclude* (state some logical conclusion based on what you have presented)
   3. *Provide* some last *thought* (end with some final interesting point but general enough not to require elaboration)
9. **Questions:** And certainly, you'll want to prompt the audience for questions and concerns.
10. **Timing (again):** As mentioned above, be sure your oral report is carefully timed. Some ideas on how to work within an allotted time frame are presented in the next section.



*Figure 1: Diagram of the 7-minute oral presentation*

## Preparing for the Oral Presentation

Pick the method of preparing for the talk that best suits your comfort level with public speaking and with your topic. However, plan to do ample preparation and rehearsal. Some people assume that they can just jump up there and ad lib for so many minutes and be relaxed and informal. It doesn't often work that way, and drawing a mental blank is the more common experience. A well-delivered presentation is the result of a lot of work and a lot of practice.

Here are the obvious possibilities for preparation and delivery:

* Write a script, practice it; keep it around for quick reference during your talk.
* Set up an outline of your talk; practice with it, bring it for reference.
* Set up cue cards, practice with them, and use them during your talk.
* Write a script and read from it.

Of course, the extemporaneous or impromptu methods are also out there for the brave and the adventurous. However, please bear in mind that up to 25 people will be listening to you, and you owe them a good presentation, one that is clear, understandable, well-planned, organized, and on target with your purpose and audience.

It doesn't matter which method you use to prepare for the talk, but you want to make sure that you know your material. The head-down style of reading your report directly from a script has problems. There is little or no eye contact or interaction with the audience. The delivery tends toward a dull, boring monotone that either puts listeners off or is hard to understand. Additionally, most of us cannot stand to have reports read to us!

For many reasons, most people get nervous when they have to give oral presentations. Being well prepared is your best defense against the nerves. Try to remember that your classmates and instructor are a very forgiving, supportive group. You don't have to be a slick entertainer—just be clear, organized, and understandable. The nerves will wear off someday, the more oral presenting you do. In the meantime, breathe deeply and enjoy.

See more information on introductions and conclusions in oral presentations on [Hamilton College’s](https://www.hamilton.edu/academics/centers/oralcommunication/guides/introductions-and-conclusions) website.

## Delivering an Oral Presentation

When you give an oral report, focus on common problem areas such as these:

* **Timing:** Keep well within the time limit. Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse until you get the timing just right.
* **Volume:**  Speak loud enough so that your audience can hear you. Practice speaking a little louder in the days before the oral presentation.
* **Pacing, speed:** Sometimes, oral presenters who are nervous talk too fast. All that adrenaline causes them to speed through their talk, making it hard for the audience to follow. In general, it helps listeners understand you better if you speak a bit more slowly and deliberately than you do in normal conversation. Slow down, take it easy, be clear. And breathe.
* **Gestures and postures:** Pay attention to the positioning of your hands. Too much waving can be distracting, but at the same time, don't turn yourself into a mannequin. Plan to keep your hands clasped together or holding onto the podium and only occasionally making some gesture. Keep your hands out of your pockets or waistband. Avoid slouching or leaning. Stand up straight and keep your head held high.
* **Verbal crutches:** Watch out for too much "uh," "you know," "okay" and other kinds of nervous verbal habits. Instead of saying "uh" or "you know" every three seconds, just don't say anything at all. In the days before your oral presentation, practice speaking without these verbal crutches. The silence that replaces them is not a bad thing. It gives listeners time to process what you are saying.

## Planning and Preparing Visuals for Oral Presentations

Prepare at least one visual for this report. Here are some ideas for the "medium" to use for your visuals:

* **Presentation software slides:** Projecting images ("slides") using software such as PowerPoint has become the standard, even though maligned by some people. One common problem with the construction of these slides is cramming too much information on individual slides. A quick search on terms like PowerPoint presentation will enable you to read about creating these slides and designing them intelligently. [Here’s a list of best practices from Trent University.](https://www.trentu.ca/academicskills/how-guides/how-write-university/how-approach-any-assignment/creating-effective-powerpoint-slides)
* **Technology Requirements:** Of course, the room in which you use these slides has to have a computer projector.
* **Poster board-size charts:** Another possibility is to get some poster board and draw and letter what you want your audience to see. Keep in mind, you want to practice. It can be a challenge to make charts look neat and professional.
* **Handouts:** You can run off copies of what you want your listeners to see and hand them out before or during your talk. This option is even less effective than the first two because you can't point to what you want your listeners to see and because handouts distract listeners' attention away from you. Still, for certain visual needs, handouts are the only choice.
* **Objects:** If you need to demonstrate certain procedures, you may need to bring in actual physical objects. Rehearse what you are going to do with these objects; sometimes they can take up a lot more time than you expect.

Avoid just scribbling your visual on the chalkboard or whiteboard. Whatever you scribble can be neatly prepared and made into a presentation slide. Take some time to make your visuals look sharp and professional—do your best to ensure that they are legible to the entire audience.

As for the content of your visuals, consider these ideas:

* **Drawing or diagram of key objects:** If you describe or refer to any objects during your talk, try to get visuals of them so that you can point to different components or features.
* **Tables, charts, graphs:** If you discuss statistical data, present it in some form or table, chart, or graph. Many members of your audience may be less comfortable "hearing" such data as opposed to seeing it.
* **Outline of your talk, report, or both:** If you are at a loss for visuals to use in your oral presentation, or if your presentation is complex, have an outline of it that you can show at various points during your talk.
* **Key terms and definitions:** A good idea for visuals (especially when you can't think of any others) is to set up a two-column list of key terms you use during your oral presentation with their definitions in the second column.
* **Key concepts or points:** Similarly, you can list your key points and show them in visuals. (Outlines, key terms, and main points are all good, legitimate ways of incorporating visuals into oral presentations when you can't think of any others.)

During your actual oral report, make sure to discuss your visuals, refer to them, guide your listeners through the key points in your visuals. It's a big problem just to project a visual onto the screen and never even refer to it.

As you prepare your visuals, look at resources that will help you. There are many rules for using PowerPoint, down to the font size and how many words to put on a single slide, but you will have to choose the style that best suits your subject and your presentation style.

The two videos that follow will provide some pointers. As you watch them, make some notes to help you remember what you learn from them. The first one is funny: Life After Death by PowerPoint by Don McMillan, an engineer turned comedian.

[Life After Death by PowerPoint](https://youtu.be/MjcO2ExtHso)

You may also have heard about Steve Jobs’s presentation skills. The video that follows is the introduction of the iPhone. As you watch, take notes on how Jobs sets up his talk and his visuals. Observe how he connects with the audience, then see if you can work some of his strategies into your own presentation skills. This video is long. You don't need to watch it all but take enough time to form some good impressions.

[Steve Jobs iPhone Presentation](https://youtu.be/MnrJzXM7a6o?si=mBIhTEVMMf-h_1cI)

Now you are ready! Go to the exercises on the next page as warmups to help you start working towards that big day!

## Activities and Exercises

* Ready to get started? Think of a topic that interests you and develop an introduction to a talk about it that follows the guidelines in the chapter for writing an introduction. Try it out on a classmate. Then, take turns asking each other questions about your topic.
* Design three visuals for your topic, including a title page. Use the Styles and Themes feature in PowerPoint to create a consistent theme for a presentation.
* Find a YouTube video or a tutorial on how to make good presentations. Share it with classmates by teaching some of the main points in group discussion.
* In small groups, develop a list of "rules" to follow when you must give an oral presentation, then create a class list!
* In a memo to your teacher (or in an online discussion forum) share some of your "best practices" ideas for getting through a presentation. Also, share some details from the most horrible presentations you've ever seen or given. Maybe you can help a classmate avoid making the same mistakes!

[Oral Presentation Evaluation Sheet Example](https://www.unlv.edu/sites/default/files/story_attachments/1111/Podium%20Evaluations_0.pdf" \t "_blank)

## Attribution

This chapter is revised from the first edition of *Open Technical Communication*, Chapter 2.12: “[Oral Presentations](https://alg.manifoldapp.org/read/open-technical-communication/section/e4660e24-17b6-4dcc-ac00-717c13bd30ff)” by David McMurrey and Cassandra Race, which is openly available under a Creative Commons Attribution license.

The content in Chapter 2.12 of the first edition of *Open TC* was originally sourced and revised from David McMurrey’s *Online Technical Writing*, section titled “[Oral Presentations](https://mcmassociates.io/textbook/oral.html),” which is openly available under a Creative Commons Attribution license.

## AI Assistance Notice

Some parts of this chapter were brainstormed, drafted, and/or revised in conversation with ChatGPT 4o and Google Gemini 2.5 Flash. All AI-generated content was reviewed and revised as needed by a human author.