

# Involving your audience

This guide offers straightforward suggestions for getting and keeping your audience involved in your presentation.

Other study guides: *Delivering an effective presentation, Structuring a presentation*

## Introduction

Creating a rapport with your audience and helping them feel involved in the delivery of your talk can optimise its success. The following sections of this guide explore simple yet effective strategies for making the audience feel fully involved in your presentation.

### Why involve your audience?

Listening to a presentation for any length of time can be a difficult process. If the talk doesn't engage their attention, the audience will start to feel distanced from the talk, begin to lose track of the flow of information and eventually fail to absorb your ideas and insights. To engage an audience fully, the presentation needs to be energetic, purposeful and staged as if it is a direct conversation between two interested parties (the presenter and the audience). The following four strategies are important elements for getting the audience involved.

## Strategy One - Planning your talk

When planning your presentation, there are several ways that you can think about involving your audience.

### Plan from the audience's perspective

The first step is to think about your presentation from the audience's perspective:

- what will they be interested in?
- what will they already know?
- what might help them learn?

By asking these questions, and by being able to identify answers, you are starting to think creatively about your audience's interests and needs. Remember, the aim is to give the impression that your presentation has been planned according to your audience's specific interests. You can reinforce this impression by referring to information that the group already knows: "*When we looked at Porsche last week we saw that ...*" This helps your audience assimilate new information much more effectively by building on their existing knowledge.

### **Questions and answers**

Asking rhetorical questions as you move through your presentation involves your audience by stimulating their own thought processes. This technique also helps move between sections of your presentation as it establishes a clear transition from one point to another: "*I think this proves that there is a strong relationship between A and B but what are the implications for the working practices of C ?*"

When planning your presentation you should also identify opportunities for your audience to ask questions. Some presenters prefer to be interrupted as they go along, to pause for questions after each key stage or to reserve any questions until the end of the presentation. All of these approaches have their advantages and disadvantages but it is useful to tell your audience when you will be taking questions so that they know what is expected of them.

## **Strategy Two - Delivering your talk**

There are a number of strategies that you can adopt when delivering your material to maximise the sense of audience involvement. Some of these are listed below.

### **Eye contact**

Making eye contact is one of the most powerful techniques for involving your audience. If used well, eye contact can serve to make your address much more personal and thus more effective. If eye contact is avoided, the presenter can appear to be nervous and unconvincing. If eye contact is held too long, audience members can feel awkward and intimidated. It is important to share eye contact with all members of a small audience or all sections of a large audience. Avoid making eye contact with just the people you know or don't know, taking particular care not to deliver your entire presentation to the person who's assessing your work. Remember that you will need to involve (and therefore make eye contact with) the whole audience if you are to make an effective presentation.

If you are nervous, eye contact can be very difficult to establish and then maintain. Remember that some eye contact is better than none and that you should try to build your confidence over the course of your presentation(s). To build your use of eye contact focus on people's foreheads so that you are at least looking in their direction. This sounds silly but is much better than looking at the ceiling, floor or your notes. Gradually start to feed in some direct eye contact as you become more confident.

### **Body language (position, posture and gesture)**

An effective presenter pays close attention to the physical relationship with her/his audience. If you stand hidden behind a computer console or stand too far away from your audience, they will not develop a

bond with you and this will limit the effectiveness of your presentation. Similarly, standing over them or sitting too closely amongst them will not establish enough distance to secure your identity as the presenter or leader of the session. Your posture will also dictate levels of audience involvement. If you're too relaxed and sit slumped in a chair to deliver your talk, the audience might drift away. Find a comfortable but purposeful position in relation to your audience and adopt an upright sitting or standing posture that allows for movement and gesture.

Your use of gesture is of course another way of involving your audience in your presentation. Audiences respond well to the physical energy and enthusiasm being conveyed by a presenter, and thus the use of clear and controlled gestures will greatly enhance your presentation. Gestures that are open and reach out to your audience serve to extend your presentation to them and thus help them feel more involved. If you stand at the front with your hands in your pockets you will, quite literally, not be reaching out to them and this will again impede the effectiveness of your talk.

### **Strategy Three - Using language effectively**

Your use of language has a direct influence on the way that you engage your audience. The most important point here is to make sure that you are talking 'their' language. In other words, try to avoid using forms of language that are too formal or informal, too technical or too simplistic depending upon the nature of your talk and the knowledge base of your audience. Pitching your presentation at the right level can be a challenge but it is very effective for making the audience feel involved.

Another method for involving your audience is to make sure that you are using a conversational tone rather than a formal 'academic' tone. In other words, a natural speech pattern will feel more familiar and easier to listen to than a formal and complex language. Of course, the level of complexity should suit your audience, but it is possible to communicate highly challenging ideas using simple clear sentences.

### **Strategy Four - Hard work**

The final way of involving your audience is to work hard at communicating your presentation to all areas of the room. This requires energy as you will need to make sure that your voice and gestures are 'big' enough to communicate over a distance. A presenter who stands and reads with his or her eyes buried in a script will only ever communicate over a limited distance. However, a presenter who is working hard at making eye contact, pays attention to the volume of his or her speaking voice, conveys enthusiasm for ideas and uses facial and body gestures to welcome, reassure and involve the audience will be transmitting energy over a much wider area.

Whilst a presenter should always appear natural and avoid using exaggerated behaviour to get a message across, an effective presentation is hard work to deliver because there are so many elements to control. The effort of creating and pushing out enough energy to make an impact will be tiring, but worth the extra work.

### **Summary**

Involving your audience is essential to making an impact. Your presentation should pull them in, get their attention and stimulate their thoughts and understanding. This can be done in a number of ways. The

way that you plan your presentation will be critical in terms of using language and ideas that your audience will understand. You must also ensure that there is sufficient time for questions and discussion. The way that you deliver your presentation should create a bond with your audience. Your use of eye contact, gesture, spoken language and energy should communicate effectively and enthusiastically with all areas of the room, thus ensuring that the audience receives positive messages about you and your material.

This study guide is one of a series produced by Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills. You can find us on the 2nd floor of the David Wilson Library

0116 252 2004 | [studyhelp@le.ac.uk](mailto:studyhelp@le.ac.uk) | [www.le.ac.uk/succeedinyourstudies](http://www.le.ac.uk/succeedinyourstudies)