Keeping to time

This guide offers practical strategies for keeping your presentation within a given time limit.

Other useful guides: Structuring a presentation, Delivering an effective presentation

Introduction

A time restriction is a common feature of most student presentations as well as those in the professional/work context. You will either be allotted a time for speaking and a time for questions or an overall timeslot for both. Keeping to time shows respect for your audience and ensures that you deliver a focused presentation that makes an impact.

What goes wrong?

Time limits are frequently exceeded for two main reasons:

- the presenter has tried to incorporate too much information for the time allowed;
- the process of presenting (e.g. speaking, distributing handouts, using visual aids) has simply taken more time than the presenter had planned for.

Managing the content

When planning your presentation, it is important to understand what can be achieved in the allocated time. Remember that you cannot communicate the same amount of information in a presentation that you can in a written report or essay.

Planning

It is important to prioritise your information at an early stage in the planning process. When planning your presentation, put aside your notes and write a simple outline of your talk. This outline should be based on a series of main points structured in a logical order. Make sure that you can express each of the key points in a few words or a simple sentence. If you cannot do this it is likely that you still haven’t found a precise focus for your presentation. Remember that a clear focus enhances the impact of your talk.

When you have identified your main points, you can move on to illustrate your argument with appropriate supporting information. Choose the supporting detail for each main point carefully to find one or two examples that make a real impact and will be remembered. A wealth of less illuminating detail will be much less effective.

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Finally, plan to open and close your presentation with a strong introduction and conclusion. Although these sections will demand time if they are to be effective, and thus further limit the amount of information that you can include, they are essential elements of effective presentations and should not be ignored. More techniques for structuring your presentation are discussed in a separate guide in this series, *Structuring a presentation*.

**Flexibility**

If you have written your presentation as a complete script you will find it hard to adapt and reduce the content as you deliver your material. However, if you have adopted the planning structure outlined above, you will be better able to produce a flexible presentation that can be shaped according to the time that you have available. If you need to reduce the length of your presentation, for whatever reason, you should be able to shorten the introduction, deliver the main points without some/all of the supporting detail and deliver a truncated conclusion.

**Managing the performance**

Many presenters run out of time because they have not taken all aspects of their performance into account when planning and rehearsing their presentation. When planning your performance you will need to include time to:

- get settled in front of your audience in order to prepare your visual aids, notes etc. before you start talking;
- distribute handouts at the start/during/end of your talk;
- develop points in more detail if it appears that your audience hasn’t understood an area of your talk;
- accommodate any slight deviations from your script that you might make ‘off the cuff’;
- respond to questions whilst you’re speaking and after you’ve finished;
- work with your visual aids (change slides, annotate images, etc.);
- accommodate any pauses whilst you review your notes / allow your audience time to think between main points.

The delivery of your presentation will need to be controlled and well-paced to achieve the best impact. If you have not allowed time for the different elements of your performance, your presentation will appear rushed and congested.
Planning your use of time
It is important that when you have written the content of your presentation, you map out how it will be delivered. This should include, for example, a clear plan of when you'll be giving out handouts, where you'll be taking questions and the precise moment at which you'll be changing visual aids. This will help make these elements of your presentation appear more purposeful as well as ensuring that you allocate time for such non-spoken aspects of delivery. Many presenters mark such features on the script of their presentation so that they are all included in the final performance (much as a play script includes stage directions to remind the actors what to do and when to do it).

When practising your presentation, try to replicate the actual delivery as closely as possible. Simply running through the words in your head is not enough to accommodate all aspects of the performance. Ideally, try the presentation out in a seminar room or lecture theatre where you can practise integrating all the elements of your talk, and time the whole thing. If this is impossible, rehearse out loud, pausing where you would need time for other activities.

Cutting time
Even though you may run to time in rehearsal it is still important to leave a few minutes spare for the actual presentation. The impact of nerves and any interaction with your audience will take up more time than you'd think. It is safer to plan to be a little under time to make sure you can accommodate all aspects of your talk and avoid rushing.

If you have followed the above advice about structuring your presentation around main points and supporting information, it should be fairly easy to reduce the length of your presentation. To save a small amount of time, cut out some of the supporting detail. To save larger amounts, review your main points and reduce these in number. Never try speeding up the pace of delivery; this appears amateurish and seriously affects any impact that you may be trying to make.

Managing the ‘mental clock’
Many presenters rely on their own mental awareness of time passing to keep themselves to time. Unless you are a very experienced presenter, this rarely works in practice (it is not unusual for a presenter to feel that they've only spoken for 5 minutes when in fact they took closer to 15). Always refer to a clock at the back of the room to keep a track of time. Alternatively, prop your wristwatch up on the desk in front of you to avoid having to glance down at your wrist. Time your delivery in rehearsal and make a note on your script where you should have reached in 5, 10, 15 minutes etc. If it looks like you're running out of time, pause for a moment to review what you can realistically achieve in the last moments. Always remember to include a conclusion, no matter how brief. This is where you make a lasting impression on your audience and is a vital part of your success as a presenter.
Summary

Keeping to time requires that you carefully prioritise information for inclusion in your presentation and plan each element of your delivery carefully (i.e. the script, your use of visual aids, questions from the audience). Rehearse your presentation thoroughly so that you have a clear idea of how the different elements fit together and can gauge how much time you should allocate to each. When delivering your presentation, keep an eye on the passage of time and be able to adjust your presentation accordingly. The more experienced you become, the more skilled you will be at determining the amount of information that can be included in a given time slot. However, even this isn’t fail-proof and you should always rehearse carefully to ensure that you keep to time.