This guide addresses the key difficulties associated with speaking to large groups, offering creative and practical solutions for making powerful presentations.

Other useful guides from Learning Development: Planning an effective presentation, Delivering an effective presentation, Using visual aids.

Introduction

Large groups can be a challenge to even the most experienced of presenters. Anxieties can arise from:

- the lack of contact with the audience;
- an increased fear of making mistakes;
- the difficulty in assessing whether or not the audience has understood and valued the presentation.

Yet, despite these concerns, making presentations to large groups can be a very rewarding experience, particularly if you approach the task with imagination and enthusiasm. This Study Guide presents many practical suggestions for speaking to large groups, encouraging you to develop strategies to overcome the problems and develop an effective speaking style.

Strategy one: preparation

The presenter’s tools of eye contact, body language and voice work that succeed with small groups can become less effective in large group settings. This is because the presenter is trying to share them with the whole group rather than focusing on a few individuals. As these tools are powerful ways of promoting learning and communicating with clarity, this sharing limits the ability to communicate complex information. This is because it becomes harder for the audience to pay attention and take everything in as less of the talk is directed to them individually. However, research has shown that the personal qualities of the presenter are the most important elements in effective communication in both small and large groups. Careful preparation will therefore help you overcome these problems.

Understand your material

To begin with, it is important that you have a full understanding of your material. This will help you identify clear main points and construct a strong linear argument. Use these points to select appropriate visual images, examples and analogies to help your audience understand key concepts. Large group presentations benefit from carefully chosen visual images to make bold and instantly accessible statements. Think about using handouts to support your presentation. This will give your audience something concrete to ‘take away’ and is a powerful way of communicating complex detail which might be lost in the large group setting.

Map out your performance

Another important aspect of your preparation includes the need to have a clear understanding of your performance as a whole, including the pace of delivery and how you plan to use your visual aids. This can best be achieved by ‘mapping out’ your presentation in advance to identify what you will need to do at each stage. Some presenters
make notes on their script to remind themselves to do certain things at certain times; to pause, to change slide, even to smile! The following visual prompts can help you create a map of your presentation so that you know what you need to do at each stage of delivery.

![Visual prompts](image)

**Figure 1 Simple visual prompts for annotating presenter’s notes**

**Understanding the venue**

Even a well-prepared presentation can fail if you are not in full control of your environment. If at all possible, visit the venue beforehand to explore the physical layout and the audio-visual equipment. Visualise yourself presenting there, ask such questions as:

- what problems might arise in this space (e.g. where do people come in and go out)?
- where’s the best place to stand so that everyone will be able to see and hear?
- is all the equipment that you need in place?
- where are the light switches and volume controls?
- do the lights operate at different settings (i.e. will you be plunged into complete darkness and unable to read your notes when trying to show slides)?
- how might you make best use of the environment to create an impact?

If you can’t visit the venue, try to request a floor plan or ask for a list of technical specifications to help you prepare.

**Strategy two: reducing anonymity**

A particular difficulty associated with presenting to large groups is that the presenter feels distanced from the audience and vice versa. It is important to try to break down this barrier from the very moment the audience comes in. The following strategies have been found to work:

- display a title slide which includes your name whilst the audience are drifting in. This will help set the scene and prepare the audience for your talk;
- avoid hiding at the front whilst the audience are coming in and settling down. Instead, move amongst the audience, welcoming people that you know;
- encourage the audience to start filling the venue up from the front; this puts you more in charge of the event and encourages casual dialogue;
- introduce yourself and your talk (don’t assume that everyone knows what’s going to happen next);
- check that everyone can see your visual aids and hear your voice. Show consideration for your audience by addressing any problems.

Large venues often prevent audience members asking questions and may limit any discussion that you try to generate. Clearly announce where you’ll be taking questions so that the audience knows what will be expected of them. Try to be creative in your approach to discussion, offering alternative ways of contacting you other than questions during and after your talk. Displaying your email address or a ‘phone number can help an audience ask questions after the event has finished, thus reducing some of this pressure.

**Strategy three: presentation style**

In order to make the most of a large venue, you will need to pay attention to certain aspects of your performance. Key issues here are to make sure that the audience is following your presentation, that you avoid distractions, and that you keep things moving at a lively pace. Recommendations for presenting to large audiences include the following:
wait until everyone is settled before you start to speak (remember, you are in control of the event, not the audience);

- announce the start of your presentation and wait for quiet (don’t be afraid to calmly and politely assert your control by asking for quiet if this isn’t forthcoming);

- try to avoid speaking for all of the time as this can become tiring for the audience, and yourself. Use visual aids such as slides or video clips to punctuate your presentation;

- be careful to lead your audience through your presentation, making sure that you use clear verbal and visual signposts to show progress and development (e.g. “moving on from ...”, “in contrast to ...”, “now that we have ...”);

- show enthusiasm for your work and the process of sharing your ideas with your audience (remember, your interest will breed their interest).

The most important point to remember is to remain focused on your work throughout your presentation. Although demanding, this is the best way to ensure that the audience remains involved and interested.

Strategy four: stage craft

It is important to think about the impact of the sheer physical size of the lecture theatre or seminar room that you’ll be presenting in. Problems here include:

- sightlines – for you/your audience
- audibility – for you/your audience
- attention spans
- audience behaviour.

Sightlines

Sightlines relate to the ease with which you can make eye contact with the audience. Some venues are long and thin where it can be difficult to make contact with those in the furthest corners of the room (Figure 2: Venue A). Other venues are shallow and broad where it can be difficult to make contact with those to either side of you (Figure 2: Venue B). The danger with the first (A) is that the back rows only ever see the top of your head. The danger with the second (B) is that those to the left and right only ever see your side or, at worst, your back. A simple way of addressing this issue is to draw a mental plan of the venue (whatever its shape), dividing this into numbered sections. You can then alternate your eye contact with each sector to make sure that each area of the audience feels involved (Figure 2: Venue C).

Audibility

It is of course vital to make sure that you can be heard by everyone in the audience. Check volume levels with your audience but always avoid shouting. This comes across as aggressive and can be very difficult for the audience to listen to. If there is a microphone, consider using it, but also be aware that it can restrict your movement and produce variable sound levels (e.g. as your head turns away from the microphone). Practise with the microphone to learn its strengths and limitations. Remember that most microphones in lecture theatres are set to amplify your normal speaking voice without the need for additional volume.
Attention spans
Try to vary your delivery to provide new and interesting stimuli for your audience’s attention. This can involve the use of visual aids as well as different speaking styles (e.g. factual, discursive, speculative). You can also grab attention by physically moving around the ‘stage’ area. Try to do this purposefully (i.e. to make a particular point) rather than simply wandering around; this latter can be distracting. Come forward, make a point, then move again.

Audience behaviour
It is always difficult for your audience members to pay attention for 100% of the time, and you should allow for this. Try not to become too sensitive to an audience’s behaviour. Un-responsive faces and heads propped up by hands are more likely to be indicative of audience fatigue than they are of deliberate rudeness. Of course, if the behaviour of a few individuals begins to threaten other people’s ability to hear, you must act immediately, even stopping your presentation and addressing the situation directly.

Strategy five: using visual aids
Visual aids can be an important tool in improving the effectiveness of presentations to large groups. They can be particularly useful during key stages of your presentation, for example:

during the introduction
- display your name and the title of your presentation;
- define particular technical terms or abbreviations;
- indicate structure, either diagrammatically or in text;
- display an image which encapsulates your theme;
- highlight a question you intend to answer;

during your main points
- highlight new points or topics with an appropriate image or question;
- support technical detail with clearly displayed data;
- indicate sequence by linking points together;
- link theory and practice through the use of examples and illustrations;

during your conclusion
- summarise your main points;
- present your conclusions in a succinct phrase or diagram;
- display your key references or web sites to promote further exploration;
- display your email or ‘phone number to prompt questioning and discussion.

Try to make your images as visually appealing as possible. For example, a photograph of a Porsche car will be more dramatic than the word ‘Porsche’ as a bullet point on a slide. Further information about the use of visual aids can be found in the companion Study guide, Using visual aids.

Conclusion
The key to speaking to audiences in large venues is to take control of the space and to carefully plan your presentation to stimulate and maintain your audience’s attention. It is important to be well prepared and to have a clear understanding of what you will be doing and when this will happen. Although working with large audiences can be challenging, attention to both detail and process can result in a powerful presentation that interests and informs.