HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE FINAL PRESENTATION

Your objective: To effectively communicate the knowledge you’ve acquired from your research to a listening audience.

The presentation will differ from your written research report in that it will be brief, spoken, and intended for an uninformed but intelligent listener. (In contrast, you will write the research report for your peers and other readers who are familiar with the research process. They will want more extensive information and quantitative explanation, and they may want to study the written document in detail.)

In business environments where research is reported to a broad audience, an oral presentation is normally offered first to orient the audience and to set a context for the written document to follow. The speech should help listeners understand the importance of the research initiative and how the results are relevant to them and their company. It should motivate them to listen for a broad understanding and then to read the document efficiently.

The MBC final project presentation is intended to mirror this business model; therefore, a presenter is expected to

MOTIVATE
The average person in a business or public audience is not usually drawn to research, often assuming that it is dull, irrelevant, difficult to understand, and important to only a select few. So the speaker must help the audience members recognize the need for this new information, how that need was identified, and how the research outcomes are relevant or useful for them. In other words the speaker addresses “What’s in it for me?”

ORGANIZE
The presentation is not a summary of the final written report. The result would be a dense, generalized, indigestible message. Rather, the speaker selects the core elements of the report, those issues of greatest concern to the listeners, and develops them with evidence, examples and explanation. Most audience members are interested in three things.

1. Issue: Why is this important?
2. Purpose: What did you want to find out and how did you do it?
3. Results: What did you discover?
Therefore it makes sense to organize the information according to this pattern. (This order may not match the structure of the written research document; however, as communicators we know that raw information must be shaped to meet the needs of specific receivers.)

Here is a structure for the presentation that has served other presenters well.

- **Title** This is a brief descriptor of your presentation. Its purpose is to hook audience attention and increase interest in your subject. Make it concrete rather than abstract. (It belongs on the first slide.)

- **Situation** Here you engage the audience.
  - Take attention immediately. (This is the perfect place for a story or anecdote.)
  - Help the listeners understand the context for your work and what motivated you to do it. What was the problem, the need? What made you curious? (Items from the literature review might provide support here.)
  - Show why or how the results might be important for the audience members.
  - Establish your credibility on the subject. (Share your experience and/or background.)

- **Research question** This is the core statement in your presentation. What specifically did you want to discover? What was the research question you asked? (Be sure this question is on a slide.)

- **Methodology** How did you decide to find out? What did you do and why? (The degree of detail here will be determined by the research experience of the audience.)

- **Results** What did you discover? (Include crucial data and information from the survey. It might be most efficiently displayed in graphs or charts.)

- **Interpretation** What does it mean? Why is it important? What should be done with the results? This section is of greatest interest
to the audience. (It also contains the specific answer to the research question. Be sure to place it on a slide.)

The best speeches have a simple, clear structure, straightforward supporting statements, and striking examples, stories and anecdotes that remain in the memory.

**When preparing the message**

Because you will deliver your message in the extemporaneous mode (talking to the audience rather than reading from a text), you will develop an outline and a set of notes that will organize your ideas and support your delivery.

- Create an outline that includes the major statements that will carry your message. Write in complete, concise sentences.
- Jot down supporting details after each statement. It is natural to want to just read your major statements like a list. However, each must be supported. Provide evidence and/or appropriate explanation.
- Identify the data that is most useful in answering your research question. It is not necessary (nor is there time available) for you to include the results of each question you asked.
- Interpret your statements. Answer “why” and “so what.” “Twenty percent of respondents said X.” Why? So what? What does this mean to you? Without your interpretation, listeners are likely to supply their own and get it wrong!
- Identify the locations in your text for visuals that will reinforce your message.
- When you can clearly see the shape of your message, you will reduce your outline to a brief set of notes that will be available to jog your memory when you speak.
- Vivid examples and stories are very effective tools for speakers. Use them.
- Remember the transitions. Guide us from one point to another.
- Begin and conclude with strong statements.

**VISUALIZE**

The receiver is always handicapped by the oral mode because we live in a world where we process most of our information visually. We are better at reading than listening. Therefore, a visual medium such as Power Point (standard in most business environments) makes understanding quicker
and easier. The slides should reinforce, emphasize and extend the spoken message.

When you prepare, do not begin with the slides. Power Point is a linear medium and naturally encourages lists--data and ideas strung together like beads on a string. Rather, outline your initial message; then identify the places where visual support will strengthen it. Message first, visuals second.

Our underdeveloped listening skills also mean that presentations must be simple, straightforward and easy to follow. Extended arguments, complex explanations, lists of numbers and details cannot be absorbed easily by ear. (And don’t try to use dense visuals to compensate. They go by too fast, and data-dense slides give viewers fits!)

When making slides
- Keep the slides simple. Limit the number of words. Slides are intended to be scanned, not studied. The audience attention should be on the speaker.
- Use large, bold letters everyone can see easily.
- Provide a heading for each slide. Avoid abstract categories like “introduction” “research,” “results.” Instead try, “The situation in 1956,” “Who should we ask?” “What we learned.” The heading should add meaning or tell the listener what the items on the slide mean or have in common.
- Remember the rule of parallel structure. Items in a sequence or list should have the same grammatical structure. (If the first item begins with a verb, the rest should too.)
- Remember that you will comment on the information on the slides. You will “talk your visuals.”
- Colors draw attention, but keep them simple. Two colors are usually enough. Use contrasting colors.
- Avoid using all caps or ornate fonts. They are hard to read and often distract.
- The top of the screen is the area of greatest impact. Don’t waste it on nonessential information.
- Proofread carefully.
ENGAGE

The advantage of the presentational mode is its opportunity for personal engagement with an audience. It is the most powerful medium for persuasion and influence. (There are good reasons why business and political leaders must be strong speakers.) Speeches are powerful tools when there is a need to persuade, inspire, engage, motivate, clarify or respond.

When challenged to communicate “dull” information, the presentation is the opportunity to energize the information and the audience. Research/technical presentations are dull only when the speakers have not realized their opportunity. Presentations can be formal and engaging as well.

Delivery

- Because the audience responds to the energy of the speaker, you must send it through enthusiasm, volume, movement, gestures and direct eye contact.
- Your goal is not to perform, but to help the audience understand. Your job is to present an important message and avoid getting in its way.
- Don’t rush as you talk. If you have too much material, look for places to cut.
- Avoid wimpy statements like “I’m going to talk about” or “The subject of my research is.” Instead, make strong, content-filled statements. “Market analysis taught us what to sell,” or “How do we predict customer response without data?”
- Vocally highlight major statements so audience can follow easily.
- Show your pleasure when reporting your results. It’s important to be supportive of your work.
- Give the audience enough time to absorb the information on the visuals.
- Plant your feet, stand tall, and talk with your whole self. Let your nerves provide energy.
- Good speakers rehearse. That means talking the message to yourself, to your mirror, and on your feet to an imaginary audience.
multiple times. Rehearse your mind, your body and your tongue. Give yourself the pleasure of really feeling ready.

Questions and answers
Every speaker should interact with an audience if at all possible.

- Invite questions from the audience. This is your chance for clarification and conversation. It is also your chance to introduce research information not included in the final draft of your presentation. Welcome it.
- Respond to questions with encouragement and interest. (Don’t assume that the questioner is trying to embarrass you.)
- Imagine the questions someone might ask about your subject beforehand. Be prepared to answer directly.
- If you do not know the answer, be honest, do what you can. Beware the “I’m sorry” compulsion. (You are not required to know everything.) Invite the questioner to answer the question if appropriate.

If you find yourself feeling nervous as you approach the evening of your presentation, remember that this is not about you as a performer. You are not the most important element. Your message is first in importance, the audience is next, and you are merely the medium that carries the ideas effectively. Focus on the first two elements as you present.

We look forward to the final presentations as a celebration. We hope you do too. It will be your opportunity to demonstrate your professional expertise, and you will have great fun if you are sufficiently prepared to relax and connect with the audience. Enjoy the event, and your audience will too!