

10 Tips for a Good Presentation

Somewhere there are people who thrive on the attention and adulation that can come with public speaking. For the rest of us, we understand why speaking in front of large groups inspires the same kind of dread as snakes and death.

For psychologists, though, who face public confusion about what we do, it's crucial to put out a public and visible face on the profession. In some communities, your talk may be the only chance your community has to experience the value of psychology.

Here are some tips to help you speak like a pro:

1. Prepare

As soon as you agree to speak, you should start preparing by asking some basic questions about the presentation. You should know how many people are expected. Your style will vary depending upon who is in the audience and if you're speaking to a small room versus an auditorium full of people. If the audience includes children, for example, your style will be different than if you're speaking to corporate CEOs. You'll want to find out if media have been invited so that you don't get thrown by their presence or questions. You'll want to know how long the talk is and whether it involves questions and answers at the end and you'll want to know who else is on the program. For example, is there a panelist likely to be hostile to your profession? And you'll want to know the room setup – will you be on a panel at a head table? Will you be behind a podium? Will you be up on a stage? What kinds of audio-visual capabilities do they have? One speaker found, to her chagrin, that the room was set up for overhead slides, rendering her colorful PowerPoint presentation useless.

2. Messaging

It's safe to say that the people in your audience will be moved by the same principle that moves everyone: what's in it for me? Of course, you want to include two or three core messages in your talk, but you also need to keep in mind what's important to your audience. Remember, it's not just what you want to say, but what your audience is interested in hearing. You may want to talk about resilience, for example. If you're presenting to a military community, you'll want to tailor your message to include relevant information for service members and their families.

3. Visuals

Some people learn visually, so you'll want to supplement your talk with visuals like a PowerPoint or show a relevant video. When you use visual aids, remember that less is more. Keep slides simple and limit number of words and content. The slides should help emphasize your message, not serve as a script to read. Use simple and clear fonts, charts and images. We've probably all seen speakers who inadvertently put on a shadow play as they step between the light and the screen in their PowerPoint. But even when it's not possible to use technology for visuals, there's a crucial visual that can strengthen your talk: yourself. Before you speak, the primary "visual" you'll use in your talk is your presentation of yourself. How you dress can enhance or distract from your message. You'll want to dress professionally. And be mindful of wardrobe traps such as dangly and noisy jewelry and gaudy joke ties, which can visually strip you of credibility.

4. Make it Tangible

Whatever you're talking about, bring it down to the "ground level" with examples that make it real for your audience. One psychologist talking to kids about resilience used a bouncy rubber ball to demonstrate his message that resilience is being able to "bounce back" from adversity. Another good technique is to use anecdotes. People enjoy storytelling. Use a real-life example to illustrate your point.



5. Don't Get in Your Own Way

To connect with your audience, it's important to be conversational and use simple language. Avoid scientific jargon unless you're speaking to a group of colleagues. Diagnostic words can alienate a crowd of non-psychologists. Your body language is important as well. Keep hands out of your pockets. If you're seated, sit slightly forward and plant your feet on the ground. If you're standing, move around the room to keep your audience engaged in what you're saying. Standing still at a podium for long periods of time can be boring for an audience. If you use notes, be sure to avoid shuffling papers, especially if you're wearing a microphone.

6. Make it Interactive

The audience wants to be talked to, not talked at. If you're at a podium, come out from behind the podium so that you're closer to the crowd. If the group is small, make sure to make eye contact with as many people as possible. For a large group, mentally divide the room into sections and make sure you look at each section (front, right side, left side, back). If the crowd contains friends or acquaintances, use their names if appropriate. For example, "If you're a teacher like my friend Stacey, you've probably seen the effects of bullying on students..." Besides engaging your audience, eye contact with your audience allows you to make a course correction during your talk. If people are looking restless, for example, you can shorten your talk or change the tempo to recapture their attention.

7. Tick Tick Tick

It's always a good trick to bring a watch with a large face and place it on the podium next to your notes so that you can keep an eye on the time. If nerves have you racing through your talk and you see that you have too much time left, take a deep breath and slow down. If you find that your talk is taking longer than the time allotted, hit the highlights of your remaining presentation rather than sticking to a speech that will take up too much time – and possibly eat into the time of the speaker who follows you.

8. Q & A or Not

Your host may determine whether there is to be a question-and-answer period following your speech. If the choice is yours, you'll want to factor in whether you are comfortable enough with your subject matter to answer questions. If you choose to go with questions from the audience, be prepared to think on your feet. Think in advance of questions you hope they don't ask and of possible answers. Keep responses short and simple. And don't be afraid to say that you do not know something.

9. Practice

Take the time to practice your presentation several times in advance. Work on timing, flow and pace. If you are using visual aids such as PowerPoint, practice your presentation both with and without the slides so that you aren't rattled if there is a technical glitch. If possible, practice in front of a friend or colleague and let me throw some questions at you so you feel prepared for Q and A.

10. Breathe and Drink Water

Before you start to speak, take a deep breath and try to relax. It will help you focus and it will lower the pitch of your voice. Make sure you have water – but not cold water, which can constrict your throat – close at hand in case your throat dries up. It's also an effective prop to take a sip as a way to give yourself time if you get a difficult question.

