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Tips for in-class presentations

An in-class presentation is a 15-20-minute overview of a subject assigned in a course. You are not expected to come up with groundbreaking new insights and results but to present to your fellow-students a clear, step-by-step and easy-to-follow summary of your theme. Remember that since you as the presenters have read the relevant literature you are the experts and that you have to explain your subject to the other participants, who have not read up on the matter. You are doing the presentation for the benefit of your fellow students (and to get practice in giving talks), not for the teacher! One common mistake is that the presenters face the teacher rather than the other course participants during their presentation.

Preparing the presentation

1. First steps

Find an interesting topic (or identify the interesting/ important/ relevant points of the topic that has been assigned to you)

Even if your topic does not seem interesting at first sight, it will probably get so the longer you work on it and the more you get an understanding of the material.

2. Collect the relevant literature

Either the set text(s) as announced by the teacher or by consulting bibliographies/ reference sections in related books and articles/ the university library's catalogue/ etc. If an author is repeatedly cited or referred to in different articles or books the likelihood is high that this author is an expert in the field. In this case it is advisable to consult the original work by that author rather than using second-hand versions by other scholars. It is also well worth having a look at other relevant publications by this expert.

There is a lot of material on the Internet but you should handle this with great care. Since anyone can publish just about anything on their homepages it is almost impossible to assess the validity and suitability of such information. Many things on the Net are downright wrong.

3. Read the literature

To get an overview and understanding of your subject. While reading, make short notes, excerpts or a short summary of the work. Take your time during this step so that you get a clear understanding of your topic. The aim is to remember what you read and where you read it, so that you can easily refer back to relevant literature when drafting the structure of your presentation (4.) and working on your text (5.)

It is important that you read the literature critically. Most authors know what they are writing about, but some overlook important facts or overestimate others, and their approaches and results may be obsolete, biased, or simply wrong. It is your task to assess the different contributions to the topic. Do not simply enumerate different opinions and leave the decisions to your listeners.

4. Draft a first structure of your presentation

The structure of your talk should be logically clear and coherent: start with an introduction to your subject and then proceed step by step without argumentative jumps. Finally, sum up the main points. Bear in mind that the other course participants have not read (all) the articles/ books you consulted, so give definitions and explain important concepts, relationships, etc. even if to you these things sound commonplace.

5. Start working on your text

When you are happy with the structure of your presentation, make short notes rather than pre-formulating your talk (ad-hoc formulations from notes are much easier to follow for listeners than a read text, and your presentation have a more professional look).

While going along, make a list of helpful and relevant illustrative material to accompany your talk and decide which items have to be included in your handout (see below) and which you will use to make your talk livelier. Illustrative material may include, among others: pictures, maps, graphs and diagrams, sample texts, sound samples. The media on which this material can be presented include: the black board, the overhead projector, cassette/ CD-player, laptop with beamer, slide projector, etc. and of course the handout. Bear in mind that material not included in the handout (e.g. overhead transparencies, short videos, PowerPoint slides, etc.) will only be visible to the audience for a short while, so do not overload it with details but include only the most important points to make it clear and easy to grasp.

6. Illustrative material

Your presentation will be livelier and more interesting for the audience if you use pictures, maps, diagrams, tables, example texts, audio samples, etc. On the other hand, avoid cluttering your talk with irrelevant information and resist the temptation to use too many pictures etc. (this will probably only distract from your topic).

7. Prepare a handout

Your presentation must be accompanied by a handout, whose header should contain 1. the name of the seminar, the teacher's name and the semester, 2. the title of your talk, and 3. your name. A references section, containing the literature consulted, is placed at the end of the handout. The handout should not only contain the structure of the talk but also short summaries of its individual sections, along with definitions, important examples and illustrations. The criterion for a good handout is that its drift and arguments are understandable even when somebody takes it up again after a year. On the other hand, handouts are there to support your talk, not to replace it or to simply serve as manuscript that you read out from. If you can do nothing more during your talk than read out the handout, then the latter is too detailed.

Phonetic fonts (IPA) for the computer can be downloaded for free at <http://www.sil.org> (e.g. Charis SIL, a unicode font that can be interpreted by different computer platforms).

8. Get teacher's approval

One week before your presentation, go to the teacher (office hours) with the structure of your talk and the handout to check if they are all right. Make enough copies of your handout once it is approved by the teacher.

Giving the presentation

- Make sure all the necessary media equipment is set up and working.
- Distribute your handout (now or at an appropriate point at the beginning of your talk).
- When talking, follow your notes and stick to your structure. However, try not to read from the manuscript but formulate freely.
- Take your time for examples to illustrate concepts etc. that you introduce: your talk should not be too dense and abstract, which makes it very hard to follow. Bear in mind that you are the expert and that your talk should be directed to the other students, not the teacher. Thus, present concepts in a clear, orderly and easily understandable way. This also means that you should talk slowly (one tends to speed up when nervous).
- To get and keep your fellow-student's attention, try to make your presentation lively by using different media, involve the course participants, e.g. by asking and taking questions, giving short tasks, etc.