Making effective presentations

It's a moment most students dread: when a tutor announces that this unit will be assessed, wholly or partially, by presentation.

Few people feel comfortable standing up in front of their peers and explaining or demonstrating their ideas and nobody is born with an instinctive knowledge of how to make a good presentation. So how can you turn the heart-thumping, mouth-drying, brain-numbing panic that many of us experience before a presentation, into positive, dynamic energy that brings your work to a higher level?

Firstly, remember that a presentation is a type of performance. No one would contemplate walking on stage to perform a play without considerable prior rehearsal. Treat your presentation in the same way. Learn it. Practice all the aspects of it, again and again, until you are word and action perfect. If you are presenting as a team, make time to rehearse together as well as individually, so that the presentation flows easily between you and you can be sure that there is no duplication or contradiction between your various sections.

Secondly, you have got to know your stuff. Research the topic you are covering in greater depth than you believe is required for the presentation. The easiest way to increase your confidence about presenting something is to feel that you are as fully prepared as possible. When you have a real understanding of the subject you are talking about, you will deliver your presentation more intelligently and you won't have any lurking anxiety that someone's going to ask you a question you won't be able to answer.

Thirdly, try to keep your audience engaged with what you're saying. There are a number of ways of doing this but the most basic is simply to speak naturally and make eye contact with different members of the audience as you talk. This means knowing your material off by heart, so that you don't have to read from notes. Smiling also helps – not only will you feel happier and more relaxed (the very act of smiling alters your brain chemistry to make you feel more positive), but other people will smile back at you! And talking to a room full of friendly, smiling faces is a lot less daunting than talking to bored, restless or indifferent ones.

Props, visual aids and a joke or two

Another way to engage your audience is to give them something to do. It is not usually forbidden to ask the audience questions or to request volunteers to take part in a demonstration as part of your presentation. Even this relatively low level of interactivity draws people in to you and to your topic. If you don't feel able to go that far, at least give your audience something to look at while you speak. Keep visual aids simple and relevant so that they add to your presentation rather than overwhelming it but don't be afraid of using them. They add significant value. Don't, though, fall into the trap of trying to hide any weaknesses in your presentation behind over-elaborate or gimmicky props – it won't fool your tutor.

If you are using props or visual aids, check them thoroughly beforehand, to make sure they work and you know exactly how to operate them. If your aids require equipment that you won't be bringing with you (computers, flip charts, overhead projectors, etc.), make sure you ask for that equipment to be brought in for you, and test it to make sure it works. Even if you're nervous and want to get started, it's worth spending a minute to familiarize yourself with your tools before the presentation, rather than having to stop and figure it out half-way through.

Finally, a word of caution about the use of humour in presentations. Whilst a presentation can undoubtedly be enlivened with a few laughs at appropriate moments, the purpose of a classroom presentation isn't simply to entertain your classmates. You will be expected to cover the topic requested adequately and to take your studies properly seriously. You should also avoid any potentially offensive or derogatory
remarks and remember that humour is a very personal thing; not everyone shares the same view of what makes an amusing anecdote!

Keep to your allotted time; invite questions at the end if you haven’t done so already; and then just relax and enjoy it. Remember, nobody has ever died from giving a presentation!

http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/learning/study_skills/skills/presentations.htm