Presenting a Paper

The most important point to keep in mind when preparing to present a paper is to remember that the paper was written with a particular purpose and audience in mind. Its presentation however, is prepared with very different goals in mind. Thus, the oral presentation should be very different from your paper. Think of it as the light version of your paper. Be committed to moving away from your paper structure in order to create a stronger presentation. This will make a much better end product.

The two biggest mistakes presenters make when transitioning between paper and presentation are failing to translate for your audience and failing to engage your audience.

Make sure that you TRANSLATE for your audience:

Questions to ask yourself:

- What is the core of the paper? What parts can be left out and still allow the audience to understand the argument? Cut these extra parts out first.
- What are the most interesting parts of my paper for this audience? What do you want them to remember after your presentation? What are they likely to want to take away from the presentation? Why are they listening to your presentation?

With your answers to the above questions, make your audience believe you are giving them the most important information from your paper.

Other tips for translating for the audience:

Make sure that you change the introduction. Many times, the written introduction doesn’t come across as strong when spoken (although there are certainly exceptions to this). Think about a way to really pull the audience in from the beginning. Also let them know your purpose for presenting to them—what do you want them to know at the end of the presentation.

Have a clear preview (different than a written thesis) at the end of your introduction. Tell the audience what you will talk about in the appropriate order. You might also indicate what parts of the paper you have chosen to eliminate in the presentation and indicate that you’d be happy to discuss those parts in question/answer.

Include strong transitions that always tell the audience where you are going in the presentation—be clear. For more information on transitions, see the Speaking Center “Transitions” handout.

It’s not easy, but you’ll need to cut out much of your paper for the presentation. Different disciplines will include different sections in papers, so you’ll ultimately need to make some decisions about what parts of the paper are vital. The literature review, for example, is often a place that you can cut out completely or cut down significantly. If you have a research methods sections, you might consider cutting this section down.

- For science/social science papers, audiences often want to hear a justification of the study, a brief description of how you set the study up, and a complete description of your findings/conclusions.
- For humanities, audiences generally want a justification of the paper, then a good description of your analysis and conclusions.
- When in doubt, talk to your professor or a person in the field to get advice on what sections can be eliminated from the presentation.

Have a strong conclusion that summarizes your presentation and includes a good closer. Remind the audience of what you want them to take from your presentation. See the “Introductions & Conclusions” guide sheet for suggestions.
Make sure that you make your speech ENGAGING:

This involves delivery, supporting material, and visual aids (see the “Using Visual Supports Effectively” guide sheet and other related guide sheets).

A specific note on delivery: Many people think that the only delivery option for this type of presentation is to speak from a manuscript. That is a mistake for most people because it is less engaging. Instead, you should plan your speech with a thorough outline and talk to your audience based on that outline. With a lot of planning and practice, this is a much better decision for most speakers. If you decide to manuscript your speech, be sure to practice in order to make it sound conversational and leave points in the manuscript where you can extemporize (see “Manuscript Speaking” guide sheet for additional tips).

How do you make your audience interested in the speech beyond delivery and visual aids? Make sure that the content of your speech is interesting.

- Share your personal story about how you came to the research topic.
- Highlight interesting stories that emerged during your research, unusual findings, examples that clarify your arguments.
- Use analogies when they can help clarify.
- Think about the differences between written and oral language. For example, written language might come across as too stiff when it is read aloud.
- Remember that this is your light paper—you might need to leave out some of the details, specifics, or terminology.

Final Thoughts:
Again, what do you want the audience to remember? Probably not just a summary of your paper. Keep that in mind when determining your speech content.

Related Speaking Center handouts:
Citing Sources in a Speech
Audience Analysis
Basic Outline Format for a Speech
Extemporaneous Speaking
Manuscript Speaking
Speaking with PowerPoint

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