

Markus Öbrink

Speak up!

**A short manual for students
(and everyone else)**

in how to present stuff in front of an audience



Palacký University Olomouc

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With illustrations by Elizabeth Allyn Woock

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Reviewers:

Milena Öbrink Hobzová
Anna Petr Šafránková

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Introduction

What is a presentation?

The simple answer is: you, standing in front of a group of people, trying to persuade them of something. You talk, they listen and ask questions, and possibly you will also show them some visuals. It sounds so terribly easy, and yet it's something that scares the living daylights out of many people.

It shouldn't be like that, really. Because presenting stuff is not only part of most jobs today, but a really enjoyable experience if you do it right. It gives you the chance to connect with people and spread your ideas. Good presentation skills will give your career a push, and get you that hot job you really want. And, it gives you the possibility to persuade people of all those things that you find important, be it environmental protection, cancer research or anything else. But, if we don't know how to do it—and most people actually don't—then everything gets so much more difficult.

In today's world, where everything seems to be digital and impersonal, being able to talk directly to people is still necessary. Meeting people face-to-face is can't be replaced by e-mail and messaging. Almost everything we do is about meeting people and talking to people. It's kind of what we are made to do. Yet, for some reason most of us are nervous, or even afraid, of standing there on the stage. So the only thing

we can do about it is to learn. Fortunately, it's not really that difficult.

In this text, I'm mainly going to focus on the kind of presentations students and academic staff need to do as part of their studies and work. And I will focus on doing it in English as a second language. The reason is simple: it's my job to do this. I teach languages, and I teach people how to use them for communication.

This means talking about research, presenting results, discussing theories, and so on. Presenting is not like writing—not even close. And regrettably, it's not a thing we usually train how to do. Schools almost never teach it, at least not in my part of the world, and at university we actively avoid it. Somehow, we just expect you to know how to stand in front of an audience and talk without ever telling you how. Quite unfair, if you ask me.

However, the stuff I will talk about here is just as valid for all other forms of presenting. You don't have to be a student or an academic to use this book; rather the opposite. The basic principles are the same in the business world, in entertainment, in politics, or in any other field you might be active in. You don't even have to speak English. Everything in here is just as important in any other language. Anybody could use this short manual to learn how to present.

I have tried to keep this manual as short as possible, to make it quick and easy to use. The text is divided into two

main parts, dealing with different aspects of making a presentation. They can be used by anybody at any time to find inspiration and ideas on how to manage.

Finally, there is a short comment on two issues that often spring up: how to deal with language—this book is after all aimed at students, and the language of the academic world today is English no matter if we like it or not—and how to deal with nervousness. The ideas there will hopefully help you more on a long-term base, but they are rather sketchy, and have to be since the solution to these problems is and always will be individual.

So, let's get started by looking at how to prepare your presentation!



Planning your presentation

The message

The first step to preparing a great presentation is to decide what the message is. Every great presentation has a message, something you want the audience to think about and take home with them. This might sound funny, but many people actually forget to even think about it. They just pick a topic, and then put some random material together to have something to speak about. That's really starting at the wrong end. How are you supposed to know what to say if you don't know what you want the listeners to understand?

So, the first step has to be to formulate your message. What is it you want the audience to remember? What is that one thing they need to know? Think about it carefully, and then write it down! Don't just keep it in your head, but really put it down on paper. I have seen so many students giving presentations where they get lost in the middle because they haven't written down what message they wanted to convey. If you solidify your message with pen and paper you will remember it.

The main reason, however, it that it forces you to really think about it. We tend to be less critical when don't write things down. The pen is kind of a test: what you can't say clearly you probably haven't thought through properly. It forces you to be concrete and clear. So, by writing down the message you force yourself to really think about it.