On this page, the UW-Madison Writing Center Writer's Handbook gives you tips on organizing and writing oral presentations, answering questions such as:

- How much material can I cover in an oral presentation?
- How should I consider my audience for my presentation?
- What should I say if I'm not finished with my project?
- After deciding what to include, how do I begin writing my presentation?
- How should I deliver my presentation?
- What structural and stylistic techniques will help me organize my presentation so that my audience can follow it?

How much material can I cover in an oral presentation?

Most conferences and symposia allow somewhere between ten and twenty-five minutes for an oral presentation. In that amount of time, you can only realistically cover the most significant aspects of your project.

You don't have to provide all of the specific details; save them for the Question and Answer period or for individual conversations with audience members. Devote your time to stating your key points clearly and effectively.

How many pages long should my presentation be?

Generally, it takes about two minutes to read one typed, double-spaced page. Of course, this will vary depending on your font, its size, and how strictly you adhere to the script you have written for yourself. You will have to practice giving your presentation aloud to check your estimate.

How should I consider my audience for my presentation?

Any time you are presenting your work, you should decide what to include and what to exclude based on the composition of your **audience**.

Most conferences and symposia audiences will be composed of both specialists and non-specialists. The specialists will be highly knowledgeable in your field and will be able to give you feedback on the specific details of your project. The non-specialists won't

necessarily be informed about the technical aspects of your field, but they will be intellectually curious and well-educated, and they'll be interested in the bigger-picture aspects of your project.

Keeping this audience in mind is crucial for you as you decide what exactly you'll say in your presentation.

What kinds of information will my audience want to hear?

Most importantly, your audience will want to know how your project impacts the way they see and live in the world.

To provide your audience with this information, you should determine your **take-home message**: What is the single most important thing you want your audience to understand, believe, accept, or do after they hear you?

Your most important job is to articulate this "take-home message" in one or two sentences. If *you* can't succinctly express your central message, how will your *listeners* be able to?

Once you have clearly articulated your "take-home message," choose the **pieces of evidence that most effectively develop that message**, and eliminate those that are redundant or of secondary importance. Of course, you need to convey the complexity of your ideas, but you don't want to overwhelm the audience by providing them with more details than they can process in ten minutes.

What if I'm not sure exactly what I want my audience to take away from my presentation?

Often it's difficult to zero in on the single most interesting idea in a project full of intriguing information. As you are trying to identify your take-home message, think about what your listeners might find most exciting in your work.

Not surprisingly, presenters and listeners alike often find the most exciting parts of a project to be its **objective** (the explanation of why the project needs to be done in the first place) and its **significance** (the explanation of how the results, whether they're final or preliminary or projected, will impact your field or the world more generally).

In particular, listeners like to know how a project will affect them personally, so try to think about how your work could contribute to

larger changes that could ultimately impact your audience members' everyday lives.

One of the best ways to figure out what's most important and exciting about your project is to **talk about your work with potential audience members**. Set up an appointment with the <u>Writing Center</u> to explain your project and to get feedback about what your listeners find particularly intriguing and relevant.

What should I say if I'm not finished with my project?

Presenters often present their work before their projects are complete. If that is the case, you have several options for constructing your presentation.

If you have any **preliminary results**, you can focus on them and use them as examples of the kind of results you are hoping to obtain. You can discuss the significance of these results. Do they suggest that more work is necessary? Do they suggest that the final results will be particularly promising or revolutionary? Do they suggest that you need to revise your approach? Do they suggest that the field as a whole needs to revise its ideas on the subject?

If you don't have any preliminary results, you can focus on **projected results**: what do you think you might find when your results are complete? Why do you expect this? What significance would such results have?

In any case, whether you have complete, partial, or only projected results, keep in mind that your explanation of those results – their **significance** – is more important than the raw results themselves.

After deciding what to include, how do I begin writing my presentation?

First, consider the **unique needs of a listening audience** (as opposed to a reading one). When we're reading, we have the ability to read a difficult sentence several times until we fully understand it; we can flip back a page to see how a new idea fits in with the previous one; we can turn back to the beginning to refresh ourselves on the essay's main argument. When we're listening to an oral presentation, we can't do any of these things, and so we depend on the presenter to do some of the work of clarification for us.

Since listeners and readers process information very differently, effective oral presentations and effective written documents differ dramatically, even if they are presenting the same information. Because of this fundamental difference, it doesn't work to simply take a twenty- (or thirty- or forty-) page paper and cut bits here and there until it's short enough to deliver in ten or twenty minutes.

Think of your presentation, then, as an **entirely new document** that uses your original paper as source material. This document will need a new (more simplified) structure, a new introduction, and a new statement of argument geared specifically towards a listening audience.

To begin writing your presentation, set aside any writing you have already done, and **on a blank page**, articulate your <u>take-home message</u> and make a list of your <u>objective</u>, <u>significance</u>, and the most important pieces of<u>evidence</u> that you think you will probably want to include.

How should I deliver my presentation--by reading from a script or from an outline?

A presentation can be effective when read from a script or from an outline. Which format you use depends on which one feels most comfortable for you.

Here's a chart of the benefits (Pros) and drawbacks (Cons) of each method of delivery:

Format	Pros	Cons
Reading from a written script…	helps you make sure you don't forget any details. allows you better control over the length of your presentation.	doesn't allow you to interact as effectively with your audience.
Delivering from an outline…	allows you have more eye contact with and responsiveness to your audience	requires you to rely more heavily on your memory leaves more uncertainty about exactly how long it will take you to deliver the presentation.

Whether you ultimately choose to deliver your presentation from a script or an outline, it is important for you to begin by writing out your

entire presentation word for word. You will need to go through several drafts, experimenting with what to include, what to exclude, how to express your ideas, and how to organize them.

Once you have a final draft and once you have read through it many times on your own, you can decide if you would like to deliver it from the script you've written or whether you would like to make an outline of the script and deliver your presentation from that.

What structural and stylistic techniques will help me organize my presentation so that my audience can follow it?

One of the easiest ways to make your presentation easy to follow is to make sure that it reads like a **story**. Audiences are drawn to stories that seem to be **relevant to their own lives**, so try to make it clear to your listeners how your research might impact them someday.

Keeping in mind your take-home message and the most exciting aspects of your research that you've already identified, organize your material into a story that explains **what** you did, **why** you did it, what you **found** or expect to find, and how those findings are **significant**. (Note that these are the same basic categories that you probably included in your abstract; here in the actual presentation, you have room to elaborate more fully on the basic information you included in your abstract.)

Good stories include **all information necessary to understanding the final outcome**. If a storyteller forgets to tell us about the single aspect of the main character's background that ultimately determines the story's outcome, we as listeners end up confused. Similarly, if you skip straight to a description of your experiment or your investigation without telling your audience **why** you did it in the first place, it will be much more difficult for them to process the ideas you'll go on to present. You need to make sure you provide your listeners with all the necessary parts of the story in a straightforward and logical order.

On the other hand, a good storyteller **doesn't give equal weight to every single detail**; we don't often hear about a character brushing his teeth or eating her cereal, because these details aren't as important as others that directly impact the story's plot. Similarly, you do not need to dwell on every single detail of your project. For example, you don't need to tell your audience what every single previous scholar has said about your topic, and you don't need to tell them what brand of test

tube you used or even how long it took you to run your experiment, **unless these details directly impact your <u>take-home message.</u>** Instead, emphasize the ones that are most interesting, most relevant, and most accessible to your <u>audience</u>.

How can I make sure my listeners don't get lost or miss anything important?

There are many effective ways to structure a presentation, but all of them involve three basic parts:

- an **overview** in which you state the purpose of your project and give your audience of what aspects of the project you will be covering in your presentation,
- the **body** of your presentation, which tells your **story**, and
- a **conclusion** that briefly sums up the most important ideas you want the audience to learn from your presentation.

Some presenters choose to state their results and their significance right away in their overview and then show how they arrived at those results in the body of the presentation. Others choose to state the objective and the main problem in the overview and save the results and significance for the end of the presentation. Decide what you think would work the best and as a professor or fellow student if one of these structures is more common in your discipline.

Once you have a cohesive <u>story</u> and have organized it into a straightforward <u>structure</u>, make sure to insert **<u>signposts</u>** (words or phrases that point out where you've been, where you are, and where you're going) that guide your reader through your story. Don't be afraid to be more repetitive than you would be in a written paper. Since your listeners can't flip back to the previous page or pause on a particular sentence, they need your help in keeping track of how all the pieces of your argument fit together.

When constructing these sorts of signposts, make sure that you **employ consistent vocabulary**. Don't use the thesaurus to come up with ten different ways of stating your main point – such variation will confuse your audience. Instead, continue to use the same key words to show how all of your points are connected. In an oral presentation, repetition is not a problem; it is the key to effective communication.

What types of signposts can I incorporate into my presentation?

You can think of signpost like the signs you might see on a road: they are words or phrases that tell you where you've been, where you are, and where you're going. There are several types of signposts that are particularly useful for listening audiences:

Numerical Signposts
You can use **numerical signposts** like "First… Second… Third…" to help your listeners see how several parts of your presentation fit together, to help them follow you as you detail a complicated process, or to help them zero in on the three (or two, or four…) most important ideas you want them to remember from your presentation.

Numbering may seem overly blunt in writing, but in oral presentations it is extremely helpful for signposting major points or pieces of evidence.

Parallel Structure
You can use **parallel structure** to mark transitions between main sections. Use exactly the same phrase to mark each transition, and then emphasize it with a brief pause to let your audience catch on.

For example, if you are giving a presentation on the sociological obstacles facing New York City's five boroughs, you would introduce each section of your presentation with the following phrases:
"The main obstacle Manhattan faces is…."
"The main obstacle Queens faces is…."
"The main obstacle the Bronx faces is…."
"The main obstacle Brooklyn faces is…."

While this repetition might seem elementary in a written document, it provides helpful guidance and continuity for a listening audience.

Old-to-New Transitions
An old-to-new transition is a sentence that pauses to explain to your audience where you've been and where you're headed in your presentation. They are particularly useful for reminding your listeners of how successive pieces of your presentation fit together. Again, repetition of key terms is essential.

For instance, you might employ the following transitions in a presentation about the psychological impact of documentary films on their viewers:
"I'd like to begin by defining exactly what I mean by the term 'documentary film'…."
"Now that I have explained exactly what a documentary film is, I would like to focus on the particular example of *Sherman's March* to explain

how this kind of film can have a peculiar psychological effect on its viewers…."

"And so we see through an examination of this example that documentary films can have a very peculiar effect on their viewers. It is not only documentary films that have this kind of effect, however; all such 'non-fiction' presentations of information, whether on the big or small screen, can elicit similar effects. This larger-scale effect is relevant to us today because…."

How can I make sure my audience gets my point in my presentation?

Test it out. Ask several different people to listen to you practice delivering your presentation, and afterwards ask them what they identified as the most important points. If your listeners repeat back the same <u>key points</u> that you identified as the main ideas you wanted to communicate, then you'll know your presentation is effective. If they didn't pick up on something you feel is important, then you'll need to revise the presentation to give more emphasis to that idea. It's wise to do this kind of test with several different listeners. We suggest you test our your presentation on a professor, a Writing Center instructor, a friend of yours who specializes in your discipline, and a friend who specializes in a different discipline.

Choose your language carefully and structure your sentences thoughtfully. Most of us have been trained to write in an "academic" style that sounds "smart" and "scholarly". What we often mean when we describe the academic style is writing that is subtle, dense with meaning, peppered with specialized vocabulary, and full of long, complex sentences that vary in structure.

However, the sort of subtlety that this "academic" writing style privileges is exactly what you **don't** want to do in an oral presentation. Rather than sounding "smart" and "scholarly," it will most likely make your presentation sound confusing and ineffective.

In order to make your presentation as effective as possible, simplify your vocabulary and your sentence structure.

How can I simplify my language and sentence-structure to accomodate a listening audience?

Keep your audience's needs in mind. Remember that the Undergraduate Symposium audience is composed of <u>intelligent non-specialists</u>. Don't assume that they know the background information

that scholars in your own field take for granted, and don't assume that they know the specific technical terms that are common in your field. Make sure to explain any essential background information and to define any field-specific terms in ways that your audience can understand.

Visit the Writing Center's online handbook. You will find excellent advice and examples to help you write clear, concise, sentences, and they offer a detailed list of succinct transition words that will help you make the connections between your ideas clear.

Break up long sentences. Often sentences are long because they contain lots of ideas that have been packed very tightly together. Sentences with lots of ideas joined by conjunctions ("and," "but," "or," "however," etc.) or prepositional phrases ("to," "for," "on," "in," "because of," "towards," "through," etc.) can thoroughly confuse a listening audience. Break these complicated sentences into two or more shorter, more straightforward sentences so that your listeners don't miss any important ideas.

Keep the subject and verb close to each other. Watch out for sentences that have long clauses embedded between the subject and verb. These long clauses make it harder for listeners to figure out which of the ideas is the most important. If the information in that clause is vital, condense it or make it a separate sentence. If it's not vital, remove it. For example:

Original	Revised
After conducting hundreds of interviews over the span of several months, and only after losing access to their most relevant informants, did ***the researchers***, who had only brought enough supplies for eight weeks, ***discover*** that they needed to change the fundamental terms they were using to conduct their interviews.	After conducting hundreds of interviews over the span of several months, ***the researchers discovered*** too late that they needed to change the fundamental terms they were using to conduct their interviews. This problem was compounded by the fact that they had lost access to their most relevant informants and had not brought enough supplies to remain any longer.

Keep the subject and verb at the front of the sentence. Watch out for sentences that place the main idea at the end of the sentence. Such sentences are difficult to listen to because the meaning of the sentence is delayed. In the following original example, a listener wouldn't know *who* had done the long list of activities until the very end:

Original	Revised
After conducting hundreds of interviews over the span of several months, after losing access	***The researchers*** only ***discovered*** that they needed to change the fundamental terms they

to their most relevant informants, and after running out of supplies, **the researchers** eventually**discovered** that they needed to change the fundamental terms they were using to conduct their interviews.	were using to conduct their interviews after conducting hundreds of interviews over the span of several months.. This problem was compounded by the fact that they had lost access to their most relevant informants and had not brought enough supplies to remain any longer.

Good luck with your oral presentation! And don't forget that you can make an appointment with the **Writing Center** to work on your oral presentation! Just give us a call at **263-1992**.