Preparing a Group Presentation  
Strategies and Suggestions

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*Basic premises: (1) Plan together, following through individually*  
*(2) Group work is tentative; each task below may be revisited in*   
*the course of your work together*

1. **Establish your purposes together.**

* *Review the assignment together* and make sure you have a shared understanding of what the instructor expects the assignment will do for you and for your audience.
* *Discuss your own individual objectives for the assignment:* What topics do you want to know more about? What skills do you want to strengthen? What new areas do you want to explore?
* *Identify the main objective(s) of your presentation:* Are you intending to *inform* your audience? *Persuade* them? *Inspire* them? Or some combination of these? Keep these objectives in mind throughout the process of preparing your presentation.

1. **Get acquainted with your topic together.**

* *Don’t divide up the topic too quickly.* Discuss the possible dimensions of your topic together – key content areas, questions, problems, issues -- based on what you already know about it. Then ask each group member to do some initial research in a given area and bring information back to the group. Be sure to bring bibliographic information back as well as content information.
* *Don’t ask individual members to specialize too quickly*. Don’t assume that the area in which each member does some initial research will necessarily be the focus of his or her part of the final presentation. Make sure the group as a whole is familiar with the overall terrain of your topic before the individual members begin to “specialize.” This will help you develop and maintain coherence and consistency in your final presentation.

1. **Get acquainted with the other members of your group.**

An effective distribution of responsibility in a group requires more than just knowing your topic; it also requires some knowledge of what each group member brings to the task. Here are some things you will want to learn about your project partners:

* *Identify the relevant knowledge each member brings to the topic.* What courses or experiences has each member had which might support your work together?
* *Identify the interests of each member in relation to the topic*. Return to the question of each individual’s objectives: What motivations or needs might this project meet for each member? The more closely you can tie the group’s work to the commitments of each individual member, the more likely it is that each individual will make valuable contributions to the group.
* *Identify the barriers that may exist for each member.* Everyone will have some barriers or obstacles he or she will need to overcome in order to participate fully in the work of the group. Some will face scheduling difficulties; some may be apprehensive about speaking in groups; some may have intellectual difficulties with the topic; some are fearful of making presentations; some may have other priorities, noble or otherwise. If each member is honest about his or her own limitations, the group can work together to address them.
* *Identify the roles each member tends to play in group work.* There are many different ways of categorizing group roles. A list of possible roles might include:  
  + *Task leader:* Helps the group identify its objectives, set goals, divide the labor, and monitor its own progress, focusing principally on the group’s processes.
  + *Idea leader*: Provides information, opinions, judgments, and suggestions, focusing principally on the substance of the project.
  + *Devil’s advocate:* Challenges both procedural and substantive suggestions from other group members. (This role is sometimes perceived as negative, if not destructive, but it can serve to strengthen the quality of the group’s work if the challenges are directed at ideas, not at people.)
  + *Harmonizer*. Seeks compromise and consensus; tries to find ways of bringing different individuals and different points of view together.
  + *Clarifier*: Asks questions, uses active listening techniques. Helps to make sure individual group members are understood by others in the group. Also helps to clarify group processes and decisions (“I have hard three possible ways we might divide the topic,” or “Have we decided to use information on the Web in our research?”).

Some people assume multiple roles, but many people tend to specialize. If a group member tends to be passive, the group can ask the individual to choose one of the above roles so that everyone is making a positive contribution to the work of the group.

**4. Outline your expectations for one another.**

One of the most challenging aspects of group work is holding each member accountable for his or her contributions to the work of the group. The more equitably the work is distributed and the more responsibly each individual behaves, the better the quality of the “product” and the more satisfying the group experience. But it is very difficult for peers to hold each other to account. A written set of group “ground rules,” developed and agreed to by the group s a whole, can be a useful too for any group member who is concerned about the performance of his or her project partners. Different groups may establish different kinds of ground rules, but most groups will want to consider the following aspects of their work together:

* *Cohesiveness:* What will you do to establish and maintain cooperation and commitment within the group? (It may help to refer back to the group’s objectives and the motivations of individual members in discussing this point.) What concrete steps can you take to identify yourselves as a team and not just a collection of individuals. How will you demonstrate respect and regard for each other?
* *Coming together:* How often and for how long do you expect to meet? How important is it for members to arrive on time and for meetings to end on time. It is often helpful to choose a regular meeting time and place to avoid scheduling conflicts as the project progresses. The group can always choose not to meet if it seems more useful to work individually for a time.
* *Concrete preparation:* What quality and quantity of preparation do you expect from each other? Many groups find that is helpful to conclude each meeting with a specific, tangible “assignment” for each person to complete prior to the next meeting. You might ask each individual to bring a list of resources consulted, a draft outline, answers to a pre-specified list of questions, etc.
* *Communication:* How will you communicate between meetings? How often? For what purposes? During your meetings, what do you expect of one another in terms of listening and speaking? How will you demonstrate your listening? Do you think it is important for the talking to be equally shared among the group members? If so, what will you do to help each other get and use their share of the group’s “air time”?
* *Confidentiality:* What are the parameters for discussing the work of the group with others outside the group? How will you avoid or confront the development of any unhealthy alliances within the group?
* *Constructive criticism:* A principal reason for working in groups is that the final “product” is often better when more than one person contributes to it. Constructive criticism is essential to this goal. How will your group encourage and reward critical thinking? What will you do to ensure that the criticism is expressed in ways that are respectful and productive, not destructive?
* *Conflict resolution:* How will you express and resolve disagreements or conflicts? How will you express anger or frustration? How will you express approval or support?
* *Consequences:* How will you recognize and reward positive contributions to the team? How will you recognize and respond to consistent violations of the ground rules to which the group has agreed? (Sometimes consistent violations mean that you need to revisit the ground rules themselves – perhaps they are unrealistic or impede progress toward the group’s objectives.) Your instructor may have built some sanctions into the terms of the assignment; if not, the group will have to devise its own responses.

1. **Prepare a tentative project plan.**

Once you have gotten comfortable with your topic, the other members of your group, and your operational ground rules, you can then sketch out a group plan for completing your project. This will require the group to answer the following questions:

* *What tasks need to be accomplished?* What information needs to be gathered and analyzed? What resources need to be investigated? What writing needs to be done?
* *Who needs to accomplish them?* Here is where you rely on what you have learned about the individual members of the group – their respective knowledge, interests, barriers, and role performances – to match tasks with people.
* *When do they need to be accomplished?* Work backward from the project due date. Establish specific interim deadlines for each individual and/or set of tasks.

1. **Plan your presentation.**

If your assignment includes a group presentation, invest significant time in planning the oral component of your project. If you don’t your audience will not reap the benefits of the research, thinking, and writing you did. At a minimum, an effective oral presentation requires the group to:

* ***Scope out the audience***. You should do this as a group so you have a shared understanding of your audience. Put yourself in your listener’s place. Think about the kind of presentations you have found engaging and enriching, and keep the needs and interests of your audience at the center of your preparations.  
  + ***Identify*** *key audience characteristics* – Audiences vary tremendously with respect to demographics (age, ethnicity, residence, education, occupation, etc.); interests; information relative to your topic; experiences; attitudes and beliefs; and political and religious convictions. Think about similarities and differences *within* your audience as well as *between* yourselves as speakers and your audience as listeners.
  + ***Adap****t the language and content of your presentation to your audience* – Word choice, supporting materials, introduction, conclusion, and delivery should be consistent with the audience characteristics you have identified.
* ***State your central message explicitly***. You should develop your introduction and main idea **as a group** so you have a shared understanding of the principal message you want your presentation to convey. This will ensure that the different parts of your presentation “add up” to a coherent whole.  
  + *Remember the principal* ***purpose*** *of your presentation*. Early on your group decided whether your main purpose was to inform; persuade; motivate; and/or entertain. You need not make an explicit statement of purpose in the actual presentation, but you must be clear about your objectives as you are preparing.
  + Develop a single declarative sentence that states the central message your presentation is intended to convey, and include it in your introduction and conclusion. Other terms for this concept include *thesis, proposition, central idea*, *central claim, and assertion*. Whatever the label, this statement is most effective when it is  
    - Clear
    - Concrete
    - Concise
    - Comprehensive
  + *Establish the significance of your message*. Anticipate the “so what” question; show your audience why your message is important for them, not only in the introduction but in the selection of supporting materials.
* **Structure your content**. Develop the general outline for your presentation **as a group**. You can let individual members develop the substructure and supporting material, but your presentation will be more coherent if the group as a whole agrees on the overall organization of your presentation.  
  + Develop a limited number of supporting claims that develop and support your central message. Like the central message, supporting claims should be phrased as concise, declarative sentences. They should be limited in number (2-5, depending on the length of the presentation) and roughly equivalent to one another in their scope and significance. An obvious strategy is to develop one supporting claim for each group member to present; but your topic or central message may not lend itself to that. The content of your claims, not the number of group members, should govern your organizational strategy.
  + *Choose an appropriate* ***organizational pattern***. The structure of your presentation should consistent with your purpose and subject matter. Some common patterns include:  
    - *Topical*
    - *Chronological*
    - *Problem-solution*
    - *Cause-effect*
    - Spatial
* **Support your claims**. The supporting material puts flesh on the bones of your presentation. Much of this work can be accomplished individually on the basis of the group decisions made earlier.  
  + *Use* ***supporting materials*** *strategically*. Different kinds of supporting material serve different kinds of rhetorical purposes. Most presentations benefit from variation in the types of supporting material incorporated into the body of the speech. Common choices include:  
      
    - *Definitions*
    - *Examples* (brief or detailed)
    - *Quotations* (eyewitnesses, experts, or “average folks”)
    - *Analogies*
    - *Statistics*

In selecting and organizing the supporting material, make sure it is *consistent* with the claims you are making. Just as the supporting claims should develop and support the central message of the presentations, so each example, statistic, quotation, etc. should develop and substantiate the supporting claim it is intended to advance.

* *Use* ***visual aids*** *strategically* (Hasling, ch. 12). Visual aids should support, not substitute for, the substance of your presentation. Generally, less is more. Visual aids, like the verbal content of the presentation, should be appropriate to the audience, clear, and relevant.

**Important: Be prepared to revisit your central message, supporting claims, and organizational structure in response to the work of individual group members on their part of the presentation.** Just as an individual writer may have to go back and adapt her thesis after she has written a chunk of her paper, so a group may have to go back and revise their plans after individual members have shared their work with the group.

* ***Signpost and summarize***  
  + *Use* ***signposting*** *techniques to help your audience stay with you.* Some common strategies to remind your audience where you’ve been, where you are, and where you’re going in your presentation include:  
    - Previews – “In our presentation, we will describe five strategies for …”
    - Transitions – “Now that we have outlined the three principal causes of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, we’ll descry e the two most popular solutions.
    - Connective phrases – “In addition to,” “Consequently,” “However,”
    - Enumeration of main points or supporting material – “First, . . . . .   
      *Second, . . . . . Third, . . . . .”*
    - *Repetition of main points –* “Let me say that again . . .
    - Alliteration and/or parallel phrasing of main points – “Scope . . . state . . . structure . . . support . . . signpost and summarize”
  + *Use* ***summaries*** *to help your audience retain your message.* Internal summaries in the body of the presentation clarify and reinforce supporting material and/or main points. This is especially helpful when more than one person is presenting; it maintains linkage between the different speakers. Effective conclusions typically restate the central message and supporting claims of the presentation, and may also refer back to other aspects of the introduction to convey a sense of completion. Just as it is helpful to sketch out the introduction as a group, it is also helpful to sketch out the conclusion together (even if only one person delivers it).
* ***Save time to practice.*** One of the big advantages of doing a group presentation is that you have an instant audience for your rehearsal. Going through the entire presentation at least once together allows you to check whether you are observing the time limits for your talk, to see whether your main message and supporting claims are emerging clearly and maintained in the different sections of the presentation, and to give and receive feedback on the content and delivery of each individual member’s contribution. It will significantly reduce stage fright and bolster your speaking confidence.

1. **Celebrate your success!**

Every group has its ups and downs, its strength and weaknesses. If you have tried to use the suggestions in this handout to improve both the process and the outcomes of your group presentation, you have probably learned a great deal, not only about your topic, but also about effective speaking and listening in small groups and in front of an audience. Some of that learning will come as a result of mistakes and shortcomings, but *the learning still happened*. This is no small accomplishment, and it is well worth celebrating. Take some time to pat each other on the back!