

Oral Presentations

Oral presentations are used extensively in industry. These presentations are used to communicate information. While these oral presentations are used for a variety of activities, we will only focus here on oral presentations related to your design project.

When your group is asked to deliver an oral presentation on your project, your first task is to determine the format of the presentation and the intended audience. With respect to the format, your group needs to know the following:

- How long is your presentation? Is this a short, five minute update presentation, or a much longer detailed presentation?
- What media are available to deliver the presentation? Is a computer projection system available to show your Powerpoint slides? Is an overhead projector available? What about a blackboard, whiteboard, or 35-mm projector, if needed.
- How many people will be present and who is the primary recipient of the information you wish to communicate? It is possible that a large number of people might be present, but the primary recipient of the information might be a single person from upper management.
- Where and how large is the room? Is a microphone available? What about a laser pointer? Will you talk behind a podium, on a stage, or just in front of everyone?
- Is this an individual presentation, or a group presentation?

The nature of the audience also affects your presentation. You should answer the following questions:

- Is the audience comprised of internal or external folks?
- What is the knowledge base of the audience? Are they engineers, accountants, lawyers, or mixed? Are they familiar with your project or not?
- What is the management makeup of the audience? Is the audience comprised of people within your immediate work environment, or upper management?

The next step is to determine the communications objectives of your oral presentation. The essential questions for engineers are:

- What technical information do I need to deliver to the recipient? This could include details on the process design, specifications for an important piece of process equipment, materials of construction, and so forth. You cannot deliver all the technical details on your project, only the important ones.
- What non-technical information or message do I want to send to the recipient? This could include management issues related to project staffing, project timelines, and use of company resources. It could also include the message that the project is on time and successful or, perhaps not.

The responsibility for determining the communications objectives is usually the responsibility of you and/or your group, although your supervisor may be able to assist. In many cases all that your supervisor will communicate to you is: “I need your group to make a presentation on your project to the Vice President next Tuesday.” The rest is usually up to you and/or your group.

If your supervisor asks you to make a presentation to upper management, your supervisor almost always wants to hear the message delivered that your project is successful and is making progress at finding solutions to the problems at hand. Usually, your supervisor won't ask your group to make a presentation to upper management unless this message is already clear to him or her. However, it is important to be honest, always, both to your fellow workers, supervisor and upper management. Any “embellishment” of the facts will almost always be discovered at some point in the future, leading to lack of trust and erosion of a working relationship. The information you communicate in your presentation must be honest and factual, even if this

includes communicating the message that your project is having difficulties.

A more frequent occurrence is a presentation to your immediate working unit, which includes your supervisor. The purpose of this presentation is to update your unit on how your project is proceeding, communicating your most important and current results, and providing your supervisor, and fellow unit workers, with confidence that your work is on track. Again, honesty is important and your presentation must be factual, even if it is necessary to report on difficulties and the fact that your project is not on track.

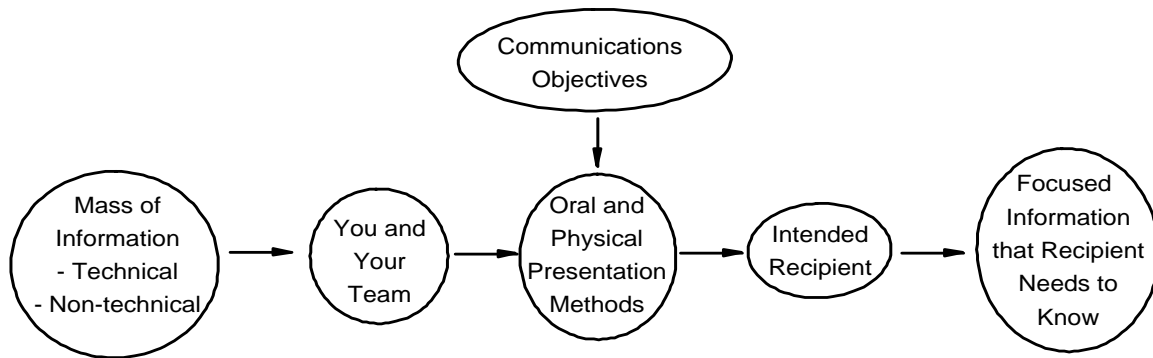
Access to your supervisor

Your supervisor is an important person. You depend on him or her for assignments, information, coaching, among a few things. Your supervisor also completes your annual performance review and recommends raises and promotions.

Access to your supervisor is a privilege and must not be abused. Of course, each supervisor is unique and your working relationship will also be unique. Some supervisors allow unconstrained access, but most do not. Some supervisors have an open door policy, some require an appointment, and many are somewhere in-between.

You need to develop a clear idea on what represents a question or problem of suitable merit to require a visit to your supervisor. Problems arise at both ends of the spectrum. If you use your supervisor's time for help with a trivial problem, this will erode confidence with your supervisor. Likewise, if an important issue arises, both negative or positive, and you do not immediately inform your supervisor, this will create an erosion of trust.

Now that you have identified the communications objectives, you and your group need to determine how to design and deliver a presentation to achieve that objective. The problem is shown in the figure below:



The idea of the oral communication is to take some of the information and transfer it to the intended recipient. There is way too much information for all of it to be transferred - the recipient only needs the information they need to make decisions or reach appropriate conclusions about your project. The means of communicating the information is mostly by the oral presentation, supported by whatever physical methods used, such as slides, overheads, or Powerpoint slides.

There are several formats that are used in industry for oral presentations.

1. Full, formal presentation. This is a formal presentation in front of a group using formal presentation methods, such as Powerpoint slides. The presentation can last from 15 minutes to an hour or more, depending on the specific requirements. Since more time is available, a lot more detail can be presented. Your presentation should be structured, with an introduction and conclusions / summary parts. You can expect to use about one overhead or Powerpoint slide per minute, but this depends on the slide content and how fast you talk.
2. Five minute project update. This is a five minute update on your project using no more than two or three Powerpoint slides or overheads. The idea is to provide a concise snapshot on your project within this short time.
3. Impromptu update. This update may occur anytime, without advance warning. The format is simple: You are asked to provide a quick, several minute, oral update on your project. Overheads or Powerpoint slides are usually not used since there was no time for

preparation.

Handouts

Handouts can play an important role in your presentation. They are very useful for focusing the audience on a number of key concepts and to provide reference material that the audience can take away from the meeting. The handouts can also be used to take notes.

The handouts can be 1) copies of your Powerpoint slides, using the handout format in Powerpoint with six slides to a page, 2) supplemental material in addition to your Powerpoint slides, and 3) both copies of your slides and supplemental materials.

You should not provide handouts just to inundate the audience with information. For each handout your team must decide on the communications objectives for each. Are the materials being handout out just for reference material? Are the materials handed out to make a specific case or point? If the materials are handed out to make a specific case or point, then the handout must be carefully designed to insure that the result is achieved.