What is an oral presentation?

An oral presentation is a formal, research-based presentation of your work. Presentations happen in a range of different places. For instance, if you work at a company that assigns people to teams to collaborate on projects, your project team might give an oral presentation of your progress on a particular project. If you work with a nonprofit organization that hosts an annual meeting at which the organization shares its activities, budget, and goals with funders and community members, you might give an oral presentation delivering that information. Learning how to construct and deliver an effective oral presentation is a useful skill. In this context, we're referring to oral presentations given to report on a research project and your research findings.

What's expected of you and your presentation?

For a class presentation, your professor might give you a list of requirements and expectations for your presentation. For a conference presentation, it might be assumed that you already know the requirements and expectations for a presentation or you might be provided some guidelines and expectations. The best thing to do when planning a conference presentation is to get answers to the following questions:

- Who will attend this conference and potentially my presentation? What can I assume they know? What can I assume they'll need explained? (More on this below.)
- What is the typical method of presenting at this conference? For instance, do people "read" a paper out loud? Do they show a slideshow? Do people typically engage the audience (e.g., by asking questions, or asking for feedback)?
- How much time will I have to present? Will I be able to show a slideshow?

Who is your audience?

One of the key questions above is "Who will attend this conference and potentially my presentation?" Different audiences have different information needs and different expectations.

The audience for your presentation depends on where you are presenting your research. If you are giving a presentation in a class, your audience is your professor and the other students in the class. If you are giving a presentation at a research forum, like UURAF or another campus, state, regional, or national conference, your audience is much more broad.

In a class context, you and your audience have spent weeks together studying the same topic and reading roughly the same materials. You might assume that they know what you know, and you might not need to spend a lot of time in your presentation covering background information. At a conference presentation, however, you might be presenting to a really general audience who doesn't share your background or you

might even be presenting to a very narrow audience who researches topics similar to you, but might do so from a different perspective.

How can I get started on my presentation?

Whittling an entire research project down to a 10-, 20-or even 40-minute presentation can be a challenge and designing a slideshow to supplement your presentation takes time and care. Outlining your presentation first is a great way to get started. You might begin by asking around or doing some research to see what is conventional among practitioners in your field. For instance, in science fields presenters often construct their slideshows following this format:

- title
- problem or issue studied
- research method
- data collected
- research findings
- implications
- conclusions

Another typical format may follow the structure below:

- title
- abstract
- introduction or background
- literature review
- methodology
- results
- discussion
- conclusion

In the humanities, depending on your focus, you might often construct your slideshow following this format:

- title
- problem or issue studied
- history and background
- analytical approach or guiding theory
- findings
- implications
- conclusions

Once you've familiarized yourself with the general outline for presentations in your field or research area, you can begin filling in your outline. One helpful way to begin filling in the details of your presentation is to focus on what, who, how, and why:

- What was the problem or issue?
- Who is involved, affected, etc.?
- Why is this problem or issue important?
- How does your research fit into already existing research?
- How did you research or analyze the problem or issue?
- What are your findings?
- What do these findings tell us?
- What are the implications of these findings?
- What are your conclusions?

What do good presenters do?

Delivering good, engaging, memorable presentations is an art form. Think about the best presentations or best presenters or speakers you've seen, such as a teacher who captivated you with their lectures, or the CEO of a company who gave a great TED talk you watched online. How did they capture your attention? How did they deliver a good presentation?

A few techniques of good presenters include telling and showing. Good presenters are often able to share information by telling people about their research or work, but also by showing their research or work through charts, graphs, photos, short videos, or other media.

Good presenters also have some mastery over their material. They're comfortable talking about what they do, what their research is about, and what they accomplish in their work. And good presenters practice talking about their work and sharing their stories—practice is part of what makes their presentations so smooth.

Another technique of a good presenter is being comfortable while presenting. Good presenters look like they're having a good time and look like they're comfortable presenting. They don't stand with their shoulders hunched or their hands in their pockets. They make eye contact with their audience, and they often use facial and hand gestures as they speak—smiling to convey a funny point or holding their palms up quizzically to convey a problem they faced.

How can you avoid presentation pitfalls?

There are a few things you'll definitely want to consider when presenting your research:

1. **Familiarize yourself with the techniques of good presenters.** No one is born a masterful presenter, and really good presenters practice a lot.
2. **Know what to expect where you're presenting.** You won't want to show up with a flash drive with your snazzy slideshow presentation if there's only an old-school overhead/transparency projector in your presentation room. Likewise, you won't want to show up with a link to an online presentation (e.g., a Prezi or a presentation stored on Google Drive) if there isn't an Internet connection in your presentation room. Ask the conference organizers what technology your room

will have available; often, presenters need to arrange or request technology in advance of the conference.
3. **Practice your timing!** At professional conferences, 15 minutes means 15 minutes. If you go over your time limit, you cut off the presentation time of others in your session. Practice your presentation out loud not only to get comfortable with your material, but to make sure you have planned an appropriate amount of information for the time you'll have.
4. **Be prepared**--email yourself an extra copy of your PowerPoint presentation in case your flash drive isn't working.

What are some other resources to consult?

- Every spring semester, the Office of Undergraduate Research hosts a workshop on Preparing for Oral Presentations. The workshop is led by MSU professor, Dr. Danielle DeVoss. A copy of the presentation may be found here and make sure to visit our Events page to stay up to date on our workshops.
- Your research mentor -- ask how they prepare for an oral presentation. Ask if you can see them present on campus or at a meeting.
- Search online for example oral presentations created by people in your research area; many researchers will post their slideshows and notes online after they've presented.
- Consult other web pages that offer advice on creating research presentations, such as How to Create an Oral Research Presentation, Tips for Preparing a Research Presentation, Research Presentation Checklist.
- Consider networking with scholars in your field beyond MSU; connect to them on LinkedIn, and perhaps ask if they'd be willing to review your presentation.
- Learn tips about communicating your undergraduate research and creative activity from MSU's Knight Center for Environmental Journalism.