

A Presenter Prepares¹: Preliminary Research, Editing, and Practice

Instruction:

1. Review the accompanying handout entitled “Some Basic Components of an Effective Oral Presentation.”²
2. In pairs, identify in the handout specific actions a presenter takes in the process of creating an Oral Presentation, and place each action in the appropriate category: *Preliminary Research, Editing* or *Practice*.³
3. Individually, contribute to each category two additional actions (not stated in the handout). And then rearrange all actions in each category according to what, you believe, is the appropriate order.

Preliminary Research (The actions taken before starting to assemble a presentation)

Editing (The actions taken in the course of assembling a presentation)

Practice (The actions taken in order to execute the presentation effectively, in real time)

Accompanying notes and explanations:

1. Context and goal: This Oral Presentation (op) exercise was created during a five-week workshop for Ph.D. students (offered by ELWS, the University of Toronto). It emerged out of necessity, for I could not find a teaching resource that simulated for my students the process of assembling an op from beginning to end. “A Presenter Prepares: *Preliminary Research, Editing, and Practice*” attempts to translate a complex, and sometimes opaque, process into an actionable plan, through which exposure is gained to different stages in the development of an op. This methodology proves useful for it highlights the actions a presenter typically takes before starting to assemble a presentation (*Preliminary Research*); in the course of assembling a presentation (*Editing*, or the distillation phase); and in order to execute the presentation effectively, in real time (*Practice*). Consequently, students are likely to gain greater control over the entire process, and by extension the outcome.

2. This handout (not reproduced here in the interest of brevity) contains a point-form summary of the material covered throughout the workshop. In large part, it comprises the excellent observations students made about what an effective op means to them. They addressed a range of issues, which include organization, the use of visual aids (charts, graphs, images and so forth), audience awareness, presentation style, managing nerves, handling the Q&A, and using PowerPoint. To guide the discussion on praxis, I often drew on Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* (c. 95 AD). Book four points to the significance of the material conditions of an oration; the space in which the orator plans to speak, the number of auditors, and other practical considerations of this nature (See, Quintilian. *The Orator’s Education*, Books 3-5. Ed and trans. Donald A. Russell. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001. 205-6). We turned to Classical scholarship also in contemplating the challenges contained in constructing the opening of an op (Prooemion is the central critical term found in rhetorical theory). In Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric* and the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, we found many relevant observations about the concern of the orator in engaging auditors at the beginning of a speech, and to the ordering of oratorical material to attune auditor reception.

3. As intimated already, this exercise relies on the assumption that the vast majority of actions a presenter takes in the design and delivery of an op can be placed into one of three categories. The first includes a broad range of research-centered actions, such as exploring the subject/topic of the op, gathering information about the host’s

expectations, the audience, the performance space, and the operating technology (projector, for instance). The second category includes revisory actions that aid in refining content, which may include reviewing all major claims to ensure that they are supported adequately; editing and proofreading text; and ensuring that visual aids are both pleasing to the eye and accurate. The third category includes actions that aid in the execution of an op, in real time.

Before administering the exercise, I recommend posing critical thinking questions pertaining to each category:

Why invest time and effort in Preliminary Research?

- A presenter gains the ability to articulate clearly the purpose of the talk by answering questions such as: why am I delivering this talk? With what objective? And how should I go about it?
- By gathering information about the host's expectations, audience, the space, and operating technology, a presenter can exercise greater control over the presentation.

What questions might one pose in order to refine content?

- Can the ideas be fleshed out and clarified further?
- Can visual aids be used more effectively than words to express ideas?
- What improvement can be applied to visual aids, in terms of style, colour, size of font, focus, and clarity?

What can be gained from ongoing practice?

- The opportunity to hone skills, and calm nerves in the process.

Tips:

The presenter should simulate the conditions of speaking as closely as possible (practice in a space that is of similar dimensions, wear the clothes you intend to wear on the day, and simulate a Q&A with a friend). Furthermore, as you practice: Time yourself, to ensure that you do not compromise the Q&A. While practicing delivery, consider the loudness of your voice, tone, clarity of expression, and pacing. Body language should denote confidence. Finally, Evaluate your performance in order to identify any shortcomings.