Speaking to Groups

When you give a spoken presentation there are important factors to consider that will improve your success. Keep in mind the differences between a written assignment and a presentation. A spoken presentation is not merely reading out an essay you intend to hand in. Effective interaction with your audience when giving a presentation means you have an opportunity to adjust style, content and format as you proceed. This advantage is not available in written work, where you have no control after the piece has been handed in, over where, when or how it is assessed.

Performance Anxiety

For most students, however, this advantage of being able to modify the presentation can be reduced by their "performance anxiety". Everybody experiences some fears about speaking in public; in fact a certain level of anxiety can be useful in keeping you alert and focused on your task. But if this level feels crippling or overwhelming, you will need to spend some of your preparation time in practicing relaxation techniques and confidence building procedures.

Here are some helpful methods:

- Make a clear list of your fears about speaking in public, ranking them from the most to the least intense. Note down ways you have managed these fears successfully before,
- Consult friends and books for techniques to reduce your anxiety.
- You may want to talk to a counsellor who can help you to reduce your anxiety.
- Practice relaxed breathing techniques before, during and after the stressful event of the presentation. That is slowly breathe in and out. Do this consciously five times and feel your tension drain and your relaxation increase as you breathe out.
- Rehearse your presentation alone and with friends and get feedback from them.
- Utilise visualisations to help your presentation. In your mind’s eye picture yourself doing the presentation comfortably. Encourage yourself with positive self talk about your skills and goals. Combine these into a “simulation” about how your presentation will be.
- Get to know your location and any equipment you will be using beforehand. Practice your presentation in the actual setting.

Preparing the Material

Here are some important factors to consider:

- The purpose of the presentation: what are you aiming to achieve? For example, do you want to stimulate discussion and interaction, inform the audience of facts, give a practical demonstration etc.?
- How can this purpose be best achieved with your particular audience? Will there be a range of competency levels in the group?
- How exactly will a successful presentation be assessed?
It is important that you become clear on answers to these questions before you determine what and how to give your presentation.

Here are some specific points to keep in mind that are relevant for any kind of public speaking:

- Information presented at the beginning and end is most likely to be remembered. Clearly state your purpose and outline the program when you start, and a summary of main points at the conclusion.

- Keep detail to a minimum: spoken presentations work best by conveying an outline, inspiring interest and a promoting a general understanding of the topic.

- Try to put yourself in the shoes of different members of the audience to foresee what they might want from the presentation.

- Make sure the physical environment is as comfortable as possible e.g. heating, lighting and seating should be suitable for the audience.

- Be aware of your non-verbal communication: keep eye contact with different members of the audience and make body movements that show you are attentive and engaged in your task. Avoid reading straight from your notes.

- Finally, remember that you are trying to produce an overall impact. This will be affected by the content, your interaction with the audience, the environment, audiovisual aids and your style as a presenter. By thinking ahead and taking the initiative, you can reduce your fears and control the direction your presentation will take.

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The Counselling Service can be contacted at the following locations between 9am and 5pm. Out of hours arrangements can be made by prior negotiation.

The RMIT Counselling Service can be contacted at 9925-4365 between 9am and 5pm.