

Impromptu Presentations

The Impromptu Oral Presentation Guidelines

In International English Skills 2 you will practice the *impromptu* oral presentation, which is a presentation that is given on the spot, without a script, lasting between 3 and 5 minutes. An impromptu presentation is usually made at the end of a discussion or meeting (in school or any organization). Our corporate spies (ELP graduates) are informing us that this type of presentation is also becoming popular as one evaluation step in the recruiting process in large corporations; the applicant is observed participating in or conducting a meeting and is then asked to give an impromptu presentation to summarize the meeting.

In International English Skills 1 you learned and practiced all of the elements involved in a planned and practiced oral presentation; all of these elements apply to the impromptu presentation except for pre-presentation practice and the use of visual aids (you have no time to practice or prepare visual aids because the presentation is impromptu). If you didn't take English 5, learn the content in "Oral Presentations" at E>6.

Standard Structure and Content

A generally serviceable structure for the impromptu presentation resembles the "Points of Logic" structure that we learned in English 5. This one is more general. Include "assessment" and "recommendations" in the "main content" if the situation requires it.

1. Opening
Content: See "Prepare an opening..." below. Use the boilerplate opening.
2. Purpose
Content: Inform your audience of 1) the general problem/situation, 2) the specific reason that you met today, and 3) whether you have or haven't reached a solution/plan.
3. Outline
Content: A general outline of the material that will appear in the body of your presentation.
4. Body
Content: Report only on decisions, expected results, and important relevant new information that has come to light (if any). Don't report on discussion details that were irrelevant to decisions; don't report on the process of reaching your solution, unless knowledge of the process is essential to understanding the decisions that you are reporting. Be sure to give informative elaboration on major points (see "Info Value" below, in "Problems from the Past"). If your team was unable to reach a solution or decision, explain why.
(Structure: Always present in a general-to-specific pattern, point-to-explanation; present the general point before its specific supporting details. Refer to "Point Fronting," at E>G, Composition.)
5. Conclusion
Content: Restate 1) the purpose (problem/s) and 2) the major points of the meeting (solution/plan, expected results).

Notes from experience and other sources

Before the day of the presentation

Prepare a "boilerplate" opening that you can use for any impromptu presentation. If you have a "boilerplate" opening, you can save precious preparation time, you will give yourself confidence, and you will make a good impression right from the start. **Memorize this boilerplate opening; if you don't use it, points will be deducted from your score:** "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is..., and I am [your role] with [your organization]. We have just discussed the matter of...and I would now like to give you a summary of the salient points of that discussion." (Don't say, "I am happy to..." or "I'm really glad to..." or "It is my pleasure to...") Oral presentation counselor Lenny Laskowski says: "If you at least plan your opening statement, this will get you started on the right foot. After all, just like with any formal speech, getting started is the most difficult. Plan what your first sentence will be."

During the meeting, and just before your presentation

Make a simple outline of your presentation as you participate in the meeting. Identify the hierarchical relationships of points (main point, major supporting points, details) in this outline. (At the same time, *do not let this distract you* from what is being said in the meeting; in fact, you might be leading the meeting.) If the outline is too complex, that means you're letting it distract you from active participation in the meeting; and complexity will also make it more difficult to deliver the ideas, communicate naturally with your audience, and establish eye contact. The main and major points, and a few pieces of data, will be enough for notes, be-

cause you will be able to add the ideas that you have in your memory and ideas that come to you during your delivery. (You usually won't have to worry that your presentation is too short. What you think is a 3-minute presentation will probably turn into a 5- or 7-minute presentation.)

If the chairperson's final summary of the meeting is well-organized, you can use this for your outline. A good summary usually takes around 3 minutes, and your presentation will take around 5 minutes; this means that you just have to add a few details to the chairperson's summary.

Just before you deliver your presentation, briefly review the outline so that you don't have to look at it too often during the delivery.

Don't try to memorize. If you try to memorize details or an opening or certain phrases, it will take you too long to prepare. (You won't need to memorize a new opening if you have already memorized the boilerplate opening discussed above.) As Lenny Laskowski says, "Trying to memorize will only make you more nervous and you will find yourself thinking more about the words and not about the message."

More tips for oral presentations

Talk yourself into confidence. If you are nervous about not being able to remember everything that you have to say, remember two things: nervousness is more harmful to your presentation than is forgetting a couple points. You can overcome nervousness: Practice mind control and delete from your consciousness any thoughts about what can go wrong (because if you fret about what *can* go wrong, it *will* go wrong). Sean Sheedy, another presentation counselor, says, "My early impromptu speeches were hobbled by negative self-talk [to myself, before the presentation]. My inner voice kept telling me that I was inadequately prepared and was destined to falter. When I hit the stage, I focused on my self-consciousness instead of the audience, and guess what—I faltered. I turned around this self-talk by realizing...that I was speaking to friends...who often did not notice when I forgot a point I wanted to make. Suddenly, I found myself connecting with my audience, as if I were talking with each one of them personally."

Don't apologize. Sean Sheedy: "When you're in the spotlight, do not apologize for nervousness, lack of preparation, missing functionaries, or poorly run meetings. The spotlight will turn immediately toward the very flaw you are trying to overcome. I've seen too many cases where a perfectly good speech or meeting was ruined because a problem which otherwise would have gone unnoticed became the foremost thought of the audience."

"Occasionally throw in an off-the-cuff remark — Because you want your style to be flexible and seem impromptu, trust your instinct and add a few words which just pop into your head," says Laskowski.

Make a short, simple closing. After your conclusion (a brief summary of main point and major supporting points), simply say, in a *strong and confident* voice (**memorize this boilerplate closing and be sure to use it**): "And that, ladies and gentlemen, is a summary of what we discussed at our meeting today. Thank you for your attention. Now, if you have any questions I'll be happy to answer them." If your closing is not simple and strong, you will appear indecisive and insecure, and your presentation will therefore lack credibility.

Eye contact. Presentation counselor Kaufman counsels, "To make eye contact, pick out someone on the left side of your audience and speak to him for 5 to 10 seconds while making your point. Then look at someone in the middle of your audience and speak to her for 5 to 10 seconds. Make another point. Repeat this pattern by talking to someone on the right side of your audience. Follow this by talking to someone else in the middle of your audience and the left side again. By using this technique, you'll seem to be talking to everyone while you're actually connecting with individuals in your audience."

Problems in previous presentations

Mr. H gave these comments to the class after their presentations for Unit 5 last year. Though these comments were made about presentations in Unit 5, they apply to problems witnessed throughout the semester.

Info Value

Define the nature of each problem.

For example, "overuse of computers." In specific and concrete terms, what does "overuse" mean in the current context (the case we're working on)? What problems is overuse of computers causing, and how are these problems affecting the more general problem?

Inform your expectations

Present enough details about each aspect of the solution. You decided, for example, to solve the problem of overuse of computers, by providing computer training. But you didn't explain every aspect. What, for example, would the training consist of? How, in concrete terms, do you think this will contribute to the solution? Let the audience know specifically what you expect from each solution, in concrete terms. Other info: How about costs? (The Finance Manager should have determined this in the meetings.)

Transitions

Stronger, more definite transitions are needed. Don't just say, "And then we discussed overuse of the computer." Provide a short summary of the presented point, like, "To summarize, then, we hope to solve our problem of overuse of computers not by using them less but by providing training that will make the employees feel more comfortable with computers." And then go on to the next point. "Our next problem was inefficient use of staff, which we have determined to improve upon by another type of training. To explain the nature of this problem more specifically, ..."

Topic or Point?

In global transitions and in the conclusion, do not state points as topics but as full points. For example, don't simply say that your team "reached a decision on salary" — which would be only a topic — tell the audience the point: that your team "has decided to offer a pay raise of 15%, beginning in January."

Be aware of the effect of your language on your audience.

Student presenters often present as new information facts that the audience already knows. In such a case, be sure to say, "As you know, ..." or "As you are all well aware, ..." or "You are all well aware of the fact that..."

Delivery

Halting speech and vocal pauses: These problems may seem intractable, but they aren't. If you consistently concentrate on avoiding halting speech and vocal pauses, you will succeed.

Eye contact: Don't look over the heads of the audience or bury yourself nervously in your notes. Provide consistently real (as opposed to abstract), individual contact. Don't talk to an abstract audience; talk to individuals, one at a time.

Body language: Shaking hair back (women), wringing the hands, shifting from one foot to another...

Sources

"Giving Impromptu Speeches," by Sean Sheedy

(<http://www.powerpointers.com/showarticle.asp?articleid=121>)

"Impromptu or Extemporaneous Speaking," by Lenny Laskowski

(<http://www.powerpointers.com/showarticle.asp?articleid=253>)

"The Ten Biggest Public Speaking Mistakes. . . and How to Avoid Them," by Allan Kaufman

(http://www.nosweatspeaking.com/ezone/back_issues-2002/nss-ezinell-2002v1-1.txt)