…make great presentations

With the help of computers and software such as PowerPoint and Keynote, it's fairly easy to make a presentation. However, if you want to make a presentation that grips your audience and get over the points you need to make really effectively, a bit of thought and planning are essential to get the three key components right:

- **Content** – which points do you really need to make, and to whom?

- **Design** – how can you make the presentation look good and text easy to read on-screen?

- **Delivery** – how will you project yourself as well as the slides to connect with your audience?

What points do you need to make?

As with any form of communication, you need to consider the needs of your audience by answering these questions:

1 What do they know already?

2 What do they need to know?

3 What do I want them to do (or think) differently at the end?

The difference between 1 and 2 will help you decide which are the key points you need to make. Question 3 may help you decide how to make the points.

Actually, there is a fourth question: *What can I realistically hope to achieve in this presentation?* If you have more than two or three main points to make, you may end up bewildering your audience.

It's better to make two points really well so that the audience remembers them than ramble on through 10 points which are all forgotten.

Don't even open the presentation software until you have answered all the questions in this section.

Organising your presentation

Still don't open the software – you really do need to plan and organise the presentation first.
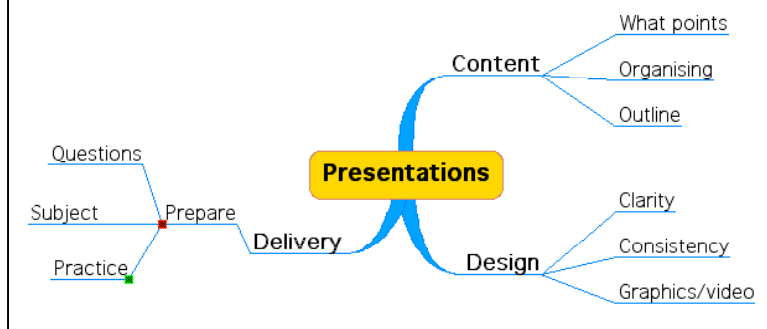
Failing to plan is planning to fail.

Outline

The first step in planning the presentation is to outline the main points and the sequence in which you want to make them.

You may find mind mapping to be a useful technique to help organise your thoughts. Start a mind map at the centre with the main topic then add branches for each main point you want to make. Sub-branches help fill in the detail of the smaller points, but the tree shape keeps you focused back to the main topic and the key points. (There is a worksheet on 'How to…use mind maps'.)

Mind map of this 'How to' sheet

You could create an outline in (say) Word using heading and sub-heading styles which can be imported directly into PowerPoint to create slides.

Whichever way you plan the presentation, make sure that the content is all relevant to the audience and that it flows logically from one point to another.

Keep it simple and clear – many presentations are just too complicated and disjointed. The fact that you've told or shown people during the course of your presentation doesn't mean that it has been heard, seen and taken in.

Structure

You should also plan the timing and structure of the presentation. Try reading the slides out loud and allow yourself time to say whatever needs to be said. To give the presentation structure, plan to have:

- a **beginning** — where you introduce the topic
- a **middle** — where you develop the main points, and
- an **end** — where you recap the main points.

Tell them what you're going to tell them.
Tell them.
Tell them what you've told them.

Design for presentations

Getting the design right is vital to making your presentation easy to read.

Clarity

It's best just to use a few words – don't put everything you want to say on each slide. You can then refer to your notes (you can attach notes for yourself to each slide) and expand on the points as you are talking. It's really boring for the audience if you just read what it says on each slide.

Sometimes you won't get all the points you want to make on one slide. That's fine; just create another slide (with the same heading) to take the overflow.

Keep text large enough to read – even from the back of the room. Of course, it depends how big the image is on-screen, but as a guide, making text four points larger than you think is big enough can be a great help in ensuring that everyone will be able to read the slides.

Choose fonts that match the tone of your presentation. For serious business reports, you might use Arial for headings and Times New Roman for the rest.

> **Business presentation**
> Select fonts carefully
> Times New Roman is very readable

> **New technology**
> Select fonts carefully
> Tahoma is a very clean modern typeface

For presentations about new technologies, for example, you might use a more modern-looking font such as **Charcoal**, Verdana or Tahoma.

For a lighter presentation, you might use Comic Sans (this font).

Italics and underlined text are hard to read in blocks, so use the effects for emphasis only and, even then, be very careful not to overdo it.

Use only two or three different type-faces in your presentation: one for main headings, one for normal text and (if you must) one for sub-headings. Keep it simple. If you set these styles in your master slide, they will automatically be used in all slides in your presentation.

> The **master slide** is the slide that you use as your template – you set things such as font size, background, headers, footers, etc., which then occur on every slide.

A contrasting background can help legibility, but choose subtle colours. Be very careful with coloured type, as some colours appear fuzzy.
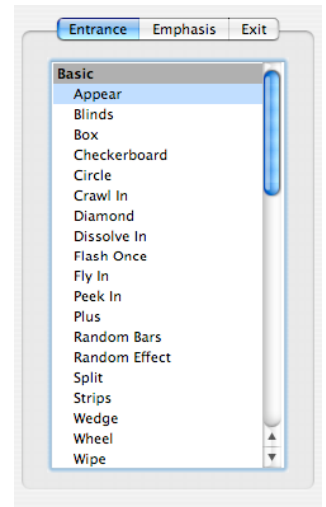
Consistency

Consistency is really important. Your audience will be thoroughly confused if the type styles keep changing from one slide to the next.

Animation

Most presentation software includes a range of ways of moving on from one slide to the next, including scrolling pages, screen-wipes, checkerboard dissolves and a whole load more. What's more, the animation can be accompanied by a variety of sounds, from bubbles to breaking glass.

The best advice is not to use them! Any animation or sound that draws attention to itself is drawing attention away from your messages. If you are using animation and sound as a way of keeping your audience awake, you need to go back and plan the presentation again, making it much shorter and snappier. Beware: what looks new and exciting to you may well have been seen lots of times before by your audience. You can tell when that happens – they groan out loud!

Graphics/video

It is easy to put graphics (diagrams or photographs) into your presentation, but make sure that they support the message and are not just another distraction. Clip Art also gets very boring when you've seen it a few times.

It can be really useful to include relevant photos (perhaps you can take some on a digital camera). These can help highlight the relevance of your presentation content.

Video can be built into presentations, but use it with care. It can destroy the natural pace of your presentation, leaving you with the task of getting started again when the video stops. Perhaps it's best used as the last slide in the presentation.

- Make sure that you are confident with the subject and the presentation. Make your own notes for each slide on the notes page.

- Prepare answers to the questions that you'd expect your audience to ask.

- Speak up, look the audience in the eye and **enjoy yourself!**

Make your presentation

To make the best presentation, you need to prepare yourself as well as you prepare the slides. This will certainly include a few practice runs.