

# Research

R O U N D S

## My Abstract was Accepted—Now What? A Guide to Effective Conference Presentations

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Although conference presentations are central to the dissemination of new nursing knowledge, public speaking can be a daunting prospect. The purpose of this article is to provide nurses with the essential tools to deliver a successful conference presentation. Accordingly, the all-too-familiar steps of assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation provide an organizational framework for a practical guide to developing and executing a relatively stress-free, effective presentation.

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*According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death... This means, to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy.*

– Jerry Seinfeld

Excellent news! Your abstract has been accepted for an oral presentation at a national nursing conference. But now what? Your initial response of excitement and pride in this tremendous accomplishment is quickly overshadowed by the sense of fear, anxiety, and perhaps even dread. The fear of public speaking is not unique to nurses. Public speaking is often cited as the number one fear in life, well ahead of death.

Most nurses would undoubtedly agree that speaking in front of an audience is a daunting prospect. However, public speaking is central to the dissemination of new knowledge. Clinicians, educators and researchers alike are constantly discovering and developing novel and innovative ideas that will benefit our patients, the profession and the health care system. Conferences provide an optimal venue for sharing these new insights

with our peers. The purpose of this article is to provide nurses with the necessary tools to deliver a relatively stress-free, effective presentation, so that the choice of the eulogy versus the casket is an easy one!

While a review of the nursing literature revealed a substantial amount of information related to the submission of abstracts, few publications have addressed the need for practical guidance in the assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation phases of conference presentations. Therefore, the all-too-familiar steps of the nursing process provide an appropriate organizational framework to guide us on the path to presentation success.

### **Assessment: Doing Your Homework**

*By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.*

– Benjamin Franklin

The assessment phase begins by gathering essential information about the conference and the presentation topic. Failing to address this key initial step will most certainly result in failure.

## The Conference

Each conference has its own unique guidelines; never assume that the conference you last attended or presented at will be the same as the one you plan to present at next! Length of time allocated to presentations varies from conference to conference, generally ranging from 15 to 45 minutes, including time for questions. The established timelines are strictly adhered to. Therefore, this information is critical to developing a presentation that complies with all conference guidelines.

The type of conference and the type of participants are also important considerations. The way a presentation is structured and presented depends on the audience. Does the particular conference primarily attract clinical nurses or nurse researchers? Is it a multidisciplinary conference, or perhaps a non-health-care-related venue? It is important for you to tailor the information provided to meet the needs, interests and knowledge level of the audience. For example, a presentation on the implementation and evaluation of a novel heart failure clinic would have a very different focus and direction for conference participants who were clinical nurses versus administrators. Similarly, each area of nursing specialization has its own culture—including language. Consideration of the unique aspects of your anticipated audience will enhance their engagement in your presentation.

Finally, it is important to confirm information about the conference venue and the presentation itself, including the specific date, time and location of your presentation. There would be no greater error than to show up at the wrong place at the wrong time!

## The Topic

Whether you are planning a clinical- or research-based presentation, it goes without saying that it is important to ensure that you have a sound working knowledge of the topic at hand. This may seem intuitive, because we usually choose to speak on topics that are familiar to us. However, our self-confidence should not be overshadowed by the need to do our homework! This includes an up-to-date and comprehensive review of the related literature. Knowledge is power. Therefore, addressing this crucial preliminary step in the development of a presentation will boost your sense of confidence when you step up to the podium to speak.

### Planning: Preparing the Presentation

*It usually takes more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech.*

– Mark Twain

Central to the preparation of the actual presentation is the development of the content. However, in today's

techno-savvy world, no presentation is complete without effective visual aids. As well, without practice, even the most phenomenal presentation can turn into disaster. Finally, the preparation would not be complete without a list of the essentials for the travelling presenter.

## Developing the Content

*If you can't write your message in a sentence, you can't say it in an hour.*

– Dianna Booher

Selecting the presentation topic is easy; the bigger challenge, however, is often how to condense your work into a predetermined, very brief timeframe (Hardicre, Coad, & Devitt, 2007). This is especially difficult if you have done your homework well, and you have accrued mountains of information on the topic. Perhaps the most important revelation is realizing that “the delegates listening to the presentation are unlikely to be empty vessels with no knowledge of the topic” (Happell, 2009, p. 49).

A simple, but tried and trusted rule in developing the presentation content is ‘the rule of thirds.’ Think of your presentation as a meaty sandwich; although the filling tastes great, the perfect panini is not complete without the Italian bread on either side! Begin by organizing your content into three parts: the introduction, the body and the conclusion. Plan for each of these three components to be allotted approximately equal time during the presentation. The *introduction* should highlight your fundamental message or purpose, as well as key literature and theoretical points. Experts in communication say that you make your first impression within the first four minutes of the presentation; so to grab the attention of your audience, you must make those first four minutes count (Hadfield-Law, 2001)! The content of the *body* will depend on the nature of the presentation. If you are presenting research evidence, the body should include the essence of the research methodology: the study design, the sample and setting, instrumentation and procedures, as well as the results. The body of a clinical presentation should highlight the ‘meat’ of the case study, clinical issue, or development/ change initiative. The *conclusion* is your opportunity to shine! The discussion and implications of the study findings, or lessons learned from a clinical scenario provide the audience with the ‘so what’ take home message of your presentation. Therefore, it is important to plan the timing of your presentation well so that you do not run out of time before you deliver this key information! Lastly, end with a bang—rather than a whimper! Your final statement should be a memorable one! “A grand finale does double duty—it

cues the audience that time is almost up, and it makes a longer-lasting, more exciting emotional connection” (Bergells, 2008).

Finally, in developing the content, it is important to reflect on your personal style. For example, if the use of humour comes naturally to you, this can be a very useful tool to capture and maintain the attention of your audience. However, humour that is awkward or inappropriate can spell disaster! Therefore, it is critical that the jokes, cartoons, or humorous asides are well planned, appropriate to the venue and certain not to offend anyone in the audience.

### **Creating Visual Aids**

*One picture is worth ten thousand words.*

– Fred Barnyard

The visual aids should do just that—*aid* in your presentation. Accordingly, the slides should not include your entire presentation (Hardicre et al., 2007). Text slides should contain the key points that you want to address—no more and no less! Novice presenters, in particular, tend to use the slides as their script. However, the use of long sentences and paragraphs of information is certain to distract your audience’s attention, if for no other reason than that the font is too small to read. According to Paradi (2010), the choice of fonts and font effects can have a significant effect on your presentation. For example, while the use of bold or italics for emphasis is encouraged, it is advisable to avoid underlining because of the association with Internet hyperlinks. Also, avoid the use of all capital letters because it may be perceived as shouting at the audience. A general rule is to use a sans serif font, between 24 and 32 points, with larger fonts for titles (Paradi, 2010). Similarly, tables and graphs should be large enough for the audience to read—or do not include them! Among his 12 design commandments for professional-looking presentations, De Rossi (2001) suggests following the ‘rule of seven’ to minimize slide content: no more than seven words to a line, no more than seven bullet points to a slide, and no more than seven rows or columns in a table. In the process of refining your slides, consider several other design commandments proposed by De Rossi, such as using muted colours for the body content; being consistent throughout regarding titles, fonts, and backgrounds; leaving ample margins; using animation sparingly; and selecting only quality images.

Most people are visual learners. Therefore, the key to a successful presentation is in the visual aids. While on the one hand, audiences today have come to expect to be entertained by visual imagery, on the other hand, the use of too much technology can detract from the

presentation itself. This fine balance also depends on the nature of the topic and the type of conference. For example, although images may be central to a presentation about a new technology to a group of novice clinicians, it may be more appropriate to focus on the written word in a presentation of novel research evidence to an audience of researchers. Regardless, few would argue that diagrams and images break the monotony of text slides; the key is to use them wisely!

### **Practice, Practice, Practice**

*Practice makes perfect.*

– Author Unknown

Practice is crucial to a successful presentation. Most presenters prepare a script that contains more information than the slides. This script can be printed on cards, with one card for each slide, or on regular paper. Keep in mind that the less paper you have to shuffle during the presentation, the better! Regardless of what type of paper you choose for your script, use a large enough font (i.e., 14 or 16 point) so that you do not have to squint in what is often a dimly lit conference room environment (Kerber, 2008). As well, it is important to number the pages. There is nothing worse than dropping your script just before or during the presentation; without page numbering you will inevitably be too panic-stricken to put the pages back in the right order!

To read or not to read, that is the question. If you are preparing your first conference presentation, it is generally recommended that you read your script. Ad libbing or improvising is great for those who can do it effectively, but can result in disaster when you are nervous. Ad libbing also tends to result in going over the allotted time. Thus, for the novice presenter, in particular, practising with, and following a script will build your confidence during the actual presentation. However, even if you are reading your script, it is important to develop a strategy during your practice that enables you to make eye contact with your audience during the presentation. For example—let your fingers do the walking! If possible, use your fingers to maintain your place in the script so that if you are distracted, or simply look out at your audience periodically, you will not lose your place. Also, consciously vary your eye contact; practise gazing at different parts of the room each time you look up from your script.

Practising on your own, using the slides and your script, will help to build your confidence. Speak out loud when you practise; focus on varying your volume and inflection as you speak. Remember—a monotone voice is the best way to lose the audience’s attention! Speaking out loud also simulates the actual presentation,

especially with regard to timing. Keep in mind that it is better to finish early than to go over the allotted time! Most conference moderators use a two- or five-minute warning system, which means that they will signal you when your time is running out. If you have prepared well, you should not be thrown off by this warning; carry on with the confidence in knowing that you will finish on time.

Finally, once you have practised on your own, ask a trusted colleague to be a critiquing audience. Although this may be anxiety provoking, it is the closest you can come to a dress rehearsal! Request honest feedback and make adjustments accordingly. Videotaping your presentation is another option. This can be a very humbling experience because we tend to notice our own bad habits, such as the use of non-words—e.g., ‘um,’ ‘ah,’ and ‘you know.’ The use of these filler words is often the result of being nervous, but can be very distracting to the listener. To avoid this pitfall, train yourself to pause in silence as you come to the end of a sentence or thought (Bonanno, 2009).

#### **Travelling to Present: Don't Leave Home Without It**

Most conference presentations provide us with the opportunity to travel. Just as you would not want to forget your sunscreen and bathing suit if you were going on a vacation in a warmer clime, you certainly do not want to forget the essentials for your conference presentation. First and foremost, a word from the wise is to download your presentation onto more than one flashdrive, and don't carry them both in the same bag or suitcase! In addition, consider handouts for your audience. Although not required, handouts are generally well received by the audience because they provide a reference to the presentation content, as well as your contact information. Carry business cards; they are an effective networking tool at conferences and, after all, networking is why most of us attend conferences. Finally, pack your wardrobe wisely; keep in mind that what you wear will create a first and lasting impression.

### **Implementation: Delivering the Presentation**

*The human brain starts working the moment you are born and never stops until you stand up to speak in public.*

— George Jessel

D-Day has arrived! It's okay to be nervous. Arriving early is central to settling your nerves. As well, there are a number of strategies that you can use to reduce your anxiety during the presentation. Preparing for the question period is also important. Finally, perhaps

the most rewarding part of presenting at a conference is seizing the opportunity to network with learned colleagues.

#### **Be a Keener—Arrive Early**

If possible, arrive at the conference early. Optimally, you will not be presenting on the morning of the first day, which then provides you with the opportunity to attend other sessions. Attending the keynote address, as well as other sessions, may provide you with insights to refer to, if relevant to your topic. If possible, check out the actual room that you will be presenting in. As a novice presenter, this will help to settle your nerves. Microphones are standard at most conferences, but if you are soft spoken, seeing this piece of equipment in the room should give you peace of mind. Check out the set-up at the podium; mentally visualize where you will stand so that you can face the audience, while still being able to view your slides.

Know the routine. As a presenter, you will generally receive a package of conference information in advance. Make sure that you review this information carefully, and bring it with you to the conference. For example, many larger conferences now mandate that all presentations must be downloaded in advance, often in an area other than the room where your presentation will be delivered. These ‘speaker rooms’ also provide you with a final opportunity to review your presentation slides to ensure that they are good to go!

#### **Delivering the Presentation**

Be prepared—to be nervous. Generally, as presenters, we are most nervous in the final minutes leading up to the presentation. Some would suggest that, rather than trying to get rid of the anxiety and tension, you channel that energy into concentration and expressiveness (<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/leadpres.html>). However, it never hurts to use the tried and true stress-reducing strategy of taking several slow deep breaths before you begin. If there is a podium, use it! Podiums camouflage a multitude of nervous tendencies, such as shaky hands and knees! Remind yourself that you probably know more about the topic than most others in the room! If you make a mistake during the presentation, refer back to the slow deep breathing strategy, and carry on. No one is perfect! Keep in mind that your audience has come to hear what you have to say, not to criticize! Above all—keep your head up and smile! A smile will help you to relax and establish a rapport with your audience.

Know yourself. Does your mouth tend to get dry when you are nervous? If so, keep a glass of water close by. Hadfield-Law (2001) recommends applying lip-gloss or petroleum jelly on your front teeth to stop your lips from sticking to them. Does caffeine cause your hands to

tremble? If so, avoid coffee or tea in the hours leading up to your presentation. Does your neck turn blotchy when you are nervous? If so, plan your wardrobe accordingly, with a high collar or turtleneck.

### Question Period—Please Don't Ask!

For the novice presenter, the thought of responding to questions may be even more anxiety-provoking than the presentation itself! However, a few simple strategies will facilitate this final phase of the presentation process. Firstly, be prepared! Having an in-depth knowledge of your topic and the related literature, and perhaps even anticipating potential questions, will reduce your anxiety level and enhance your confidence in responding to questions (Hardicre et al., 2007). Secondly, rather than blurting out an inappropriate response, either pause or ask for the question to be repeated. This gives you a moment to reflect on the best response (Happell, 2009). Thirdly, do not be afraid to admit what you do not know! Responding with “thank-you for raising that question; it is something I had not thought of, and will certainly look into” is generally acceptable to the person asking the question, as well as the audience (Happell, 2009).

### Networking

If possible, linger in or near the room following your presentation. Your audience knows who you are and may seize this opportunity to speak to you more informally about your presentation. This is a much more relaxed venue for discussion and you have much to gain by speaking to others with a common interest. Networking should also extend beyond your presentation to include approaching other presenters. Although this may at first be somewhat intimidating for you, remember, “networking is about making contacts, forging links, and developing groups of like-minded people” (Hardicre et al., 2007, p. 404).

### Evaluation—How Did I Do?

*Without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success have no meaning.*

– Benjamin Franklin

Although your first instinct may be to want to forget about it, an important part of the presentation process is to reflect on the experience. If you are fortunate enough to receive formal written audience evaluations, use this feedback as a learning tool for future presentations. However, more often than not, no formal feedback is provided to conference presenters. Ideally, trusted friends or colleagues can serve two very valuable roles by attending your presentation. First and foremost, they can provide moral support. Second, they can provide you with constructive feedback. Make the request to evaluate your presentation in advance and provide specific guidelines to follow, to include how you looked (i.e., body language), how you sounded (i.e., voice projection and clarity), and how you engaged the audience (i.e., eye contact, audience response). This feedback will be invaluable to you as you plan your next presentation!

Unfortunately, our inaugural presentations do not always turn out as well as we would have liked. But, like riding a horse, it is important to get right back on and ride again! Therefore, regardless of the outcome, treat the experience as a learning opportunity and set forth with commitment and determination to accept the challenge of presenting again soon!

### Conclusion

Although conference presentations can be a daunting prospect, the familiar steps of the nursing process: assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation provide a simple framework for developing and executing an effective and relatively stress-free presentation. As nurses, by our very nature, we have the desire to learn and share new insights that will ultimately benefit our patients. Developing and refining our presentation skills is central to accomplishing this goal. Good luck and have fun! ♥

### About the Author

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