

Oral Presentations

Oral presentations have long been used as an instructional strategy in American schools. At their worst they are frightening to give, boring to watch, and time-wasting. Used effectively oral presentations can be stimulating and motivating learning aids. To be of maximum benefit the teacher must appropriately structure the oral presentation assignment. Most students do not know how to give a brief, focused presentation. When making the assignment it is important to provide adequate coaching on the "why," "what," and "how" of the project. The following suggestions might be adapted to improve your students' presentations.

1. To reduce the anxiety of talking in front of the group, begin with safe topics the students know well. Themes such as "my dream vacation" or "my favorite game" tap a student's experiences. Permitting students to teach a skill they know or talk about a favorite possession are topics students can present with little extra study.
2. Letting two students do a presentation together is less anxiety-provoking.
3. Assign students to read magazine articles related to an assigned subject area. The students should take notes summarizing the key points of the article and prepare a 4-5 minute talk. Specify the main parts of their presentation. The talk could be split between two students, dividing the content between them.
4. In most instances individual oral presentations should be limited to 10 minutes. Few students possess the skills and enthusiasm to hold their listeners' attention longer. Little is gained and much precious time is lost if your class must endure a succession of long, boring reports. It probably wouldn't be too exciting for you, either.
5. It is helpful to demonstrate the oral presentation you are assigning. Model the parts of the demonstration and process the presentation afterwards, providing a written outline of its parts. Another option is to videotape your 5-minute presentation and to replay it, pointing out the different parts of the talk. Encourage the class to critique the presentation. It is best if it is not perfect. If you can point out your own errors or deficiencies, they will realize they don't have to be perfect.
6. If students have some experience in giving oral presentations, allow 2-3 minutes at the end of the talk for the rest of the class to ask questions of the presenter. This develops the ability to think on their feet and to speak extemporaneously.
7. Sometimes teachers provide an opportunity for the class to offer feedback to the presenter. This may be done in writing, responding to such criteria as, "List one thing the speaker did well" or "One part of the presentation that needs improvement."
8. Another tactic for developing oral presentation skills is to develop a

persuasive speech. This assignment requires students to take a stand on an issue, to research it, and to develop a brief persuasive presentation.

9. It is best to set a time limit for student presentations. The time should be appropriate to the age and developmental level of your students. Seldom should a solo presentation exceed 10 minutes, even for high school students. For elementary students, 3-4 minutes are generally sufficient, especially if everyone in the class is assigned to do one.

10. The debate format is also a most useful alternative for developing the skills of oral persuasion.

11. Require students to speak from note cards. Don't let them write out a verbatim script and discourage them from trying to memorize the whole speech. Encourage them to use a visual aid or prop. This serves as a cue, creates added interest, and gives them something to do with their hands.

12. Oral presentations can also be incorporated into cooperative learning activities, with each team member presenting a different part of the program. It is easier to stand in front of the class as a member of a supportive group than alone.

13. Having students interview a student can be a valuable learning experience. The focus of the interview must be established ahead of time. Again, it is easier if the topic is one the student already knows. Another option is to assign students to various historical or fictional roles. The students then study the lives and times of the characters they are playing. The class then interviews them as reporters with the role player answering in character.

14. It is sometimes helpful to videotape the presentations and allow students to review them later either alone, in teams, or with the teacher. Students might be allowed to check them out overnight to show their parents. Some of the better ones might be saved for use at the parent open house.

Excerpted from Classroom Teacher's Survival Guide.