

BUS 302 Presentation Tips (and common pitfalls)

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“Above all else, show the data.”

---Edward Tufte (1942-)

Preface

The purpose of this document is to help student professionals understand a key aspect of management communications—the presentation. Successful managers are expert presenters.

Business professionals need to be highly proficient at both oral presentations and written reports. However, a presentation is not a report (and vice-versa). Sometimes you do just one; sometimes you do both. If you are asked to do an oral presentation, it is typically because there is something about the issue (or case) that requires interactivity or a “human touch”. If it didn’t, a written report would suffice. Make the presentation consistent with, but not a chronologically retelling of, the written report.

General Presentation Tips

1. **Practice.** I have watched at least 50 BUS 302 presentations in the past five years. I have yet to see one that would not be improved with more practice (especially practice involving frequent and persistent feedback from student colleagues).
2. **Dress up.** Dressing well will immediately improve your presentation. Why? Because changing what you wear will change both the way you act and the way you speak. Also, other than your face (especially your eyes), your style of dress will be the first thing that the audience notices.
3. **Speak up.** This is a complicated issue, because some individuals are shy and also, it is difficult to gauge how the sound bounces off of the walls in any given environment. In general, you will need to speak more loudly than you usually do.
4. **Don’t forget to smile.** This is easy to forget in BUS 302, because you are so focused on the content of your talk. But your smile sets the tone for the context of the presentation. This is true even for challenging and deeply technical content.
5. **Make deep eye contact with everyone in the room.** This is the best way to make a lasting impression. You have to move and turn your head to do this. A related issue is not just to focus on me (the “boss”). Everyone else in the room is important too (or else they would not be there). Move your eyes around.

6. **Balance your speaking style.** Most students do not speak too slowly, but a few students can speak too fast (without knowing it). You can speak quickly once you have made a deep rapport with your audience, but in BUS 302, there generally is not enough time in each presentation to do that. So pay attention to your speed.
7. **Know your own limitations.** If you are extraverted, do not inadvertently “hog” the presentation or detract from the value of your team members. Extraverts—remember that “the best pie is humble pie”. If you are intraverted, you need to alter your style in the short run and emphasize speaking deliberately and forcefully. Intraverts—remember that the “squeaky wheel gets the grease”. If each individual member knows their own style (this comes from deep reflection) and the team prepares well (including many practices), the team will present well.
8. **Focus on Clarity.** If you have a choice between a “less-understood” word and a “more-understood” word, choose the “more-understood” word. This concept may run counter to practices that are perceived to lead to success in other COBAE classes. But in BUS 302, you are developing a relationship with your audience; not impressing a Nobel Laureate. Don’t be afraid to define words if necessary.
9. **Avoid Unsubstantiated Generalizations.** The BUS 302 presentations concern specific cases. So concentrate on the specifics of the case. If you do generalize, ensure that you have rigorous and relevant data to support your general inference.
10. **PowerPoint is not a Presentation.** PowerPoint is, at best, a guide for you and a reference point for your audience. Overusing PowerPoint is a grand mistake. Making grand mistakes in school is sub-optimal, but part of the learning process. Making grand mistakes in the workplace, especially on a recurring basis, can derail your professional career and will derail your managerial career.

Whatever you do, don’t “overuse” fancy templates in PowerPoint. This is “junk”. By “junk”, I mean that it doesn’t contribute to the clarity or effectiveness of your presentation.
11. **Charts and Graphs.** Try to avoid pie charts. This is because non-rectangular areas are difficult for humans to interpret. Often, a simple table sorted from “highest to lowest” is a better use of the same space. Other the other hand, use line charts liberally. Line charts have a time-oriented axis. Audiences can intuit trends and other relationships directly from time-oriented charts. Economists use line charts often and financial managers use line charts as the predominant chart type.
12. **Diagrams.** In my view, you cannot generate too many diagrams. A picture can be truly worth a thousand words. The secret is to know how to apply the right kind of diagram to the right kind of management problem.