Giving a tutorial presentation

Making an oral presentation of your ideas on a subject requires somewhat different skills and preparation (and more courage) than writing an argument in an essay. It is a formal kind of tutorial participation in which you as an individual introduce and discuss the set topic, contributing more than others in the group. You gain in return a chance to acquire some skills which are essential for an academic career and readily transferable to professional contexts outside the university, such as:

- experience in organising your information to suit a listening audience
- clear communication of your ideas and thoughts
- the ability to ‘think on your feet’ when responding to questions; and
- managing nervousness when giving a talk in public.

You may find the prospect of giving a public talk daunting because you are not sure exactly what you are expected to say and not sure of what the tutor expects in a good performance, and little feedback afterwards on ways to improve your style of presentation. When other students in the class have had their turn you may notice that the better sessions were those in which the presentations were clear, well-informed, lively, and kept within the time limit. Try to identify what, exactly, was effective about the good presentations. This will give you some idea of what you might do to produce a successful session.

Before you begin

1. First check on the form your presentation is to take, as there is no uniform type of presentation:
   - Some tutors ask one student a week to start off the class discussion by presenting the main points from that week’s readings for 10-30 minutes.
   - Others require you to write out a paper which you present in note form in the tutorial and then hand in later, either with or without revision.
   - In some tutorials there may be two presenters on separate aspects of the weekly topic.

2. Next check on the criteria by which you will be assessed. You may not be marked down for being nervous, but different tutors place different weight on such aspects as:
   - breadth of reading
   - understanding of theories or issues
   - clarity of structure and delivery
   - success in getting a discussion going in the group
   - the quality of the paper or notes if these are to be handed in later, and
   - keeping within the agreed time limit for your talk.

Practical suggestions for planning your tute paper

Before the day
   - Practise giving your presentation at least once, and preferably to another person rather than just aloud to
yourself. This will help you feel confident in saying rather than just reading your words (thereby improving your control of intonation and volume) and will also help you know if you are under or over the time limit. If English is not your first language, it is important to have a listener check your pronunciation of key words. Another simple and effective way of practising is to record your talk, then replay it and check it for timing, clarity, speed and tone of presentation.

- In the light of what you hear, you should edit your notes:
  - for content, so that you have covered the key points
  - for time, so that you do not speak too long, and
  - for style (do you need to simplify your language? introduce some variation in tone to keep the audience interested? speak up or slow down?).

- Because a good tutorial presentation includes a good following discussion, plan this stage by thinking out ahead a few key issues for discussion, or have some questions of your own ready in case discussion comes to a stop. For example the History student speaking on Irish emigration might write down the following points:
  - Was there a difference between those Irish who migrated to Britain and those who went to America?
  - Roughly equal numbers of women and men emigrated, a uniquely Irish pattern: was this due to the ‘push’ factor of needing to clear the family of excess members?

**On the day**

- Before you leave home, be certain that you have all of your notes and other materials you will need, in order. Get to the tutorial room in good time to check that the board is clear, with a pen and board cleaner available, and that the overhead projector (or any other equipment) works and is ready to go. Have your handouts ready to distribute.

- You are likely to feel nervous at the start – even experienced speakers suffer some anxiety just before they begin. But remember that the group wants to hear what you have to say as they probably aren’t as well-informed as you are on the topic, and their attitude will therefore be sympathetic rather than critical. Remind yourself that you are in control, and try to get confidence from that. While you talk, look up at least every now and then and not just at the tutor, speak slowly and clearly (pause between major points), and try to consciously control mannerisms such as touching your hair or shuffling your notes. Also do not feel you have to produce your talk exactly as you planned it – once your words begin to flow, you may find more fluent and friendly ways of presenting your ideas.

- At the end of your presentation it is very important and also part of the presentation assessment that you take the lead in directing the following discussion. A useful strategy is to summarise the issues you have found most interesting or uncertain and start the discussion period by asking the group to comment on those issues. As far as the discussion goes, you are not responsible for having all the answers, so be prepared to turn some questions or problems back to the group or invite your tutor to contribute.

**Some final advice**

A good presentation is really appreciated by an audience because it stimulates as well as informs them. Presenting your ideas orally rather than in writing is a skill which improves with practice and confidence, so try not to feel discouraged if your first presentation is not up to your expectations. Instead, build on your experience by noting down what you will do differently next time.