Thesis Presentation

Preview

Introduction

The presentation of the thesis is the subject of this topic. There is a pattern followed in most theses. It is important to know the usual components of a report in order to be able to make decisions about how best to present your own.

Common to all theses is the basic requirement of good presentation which is necessary to give your work the best possible chance of being understood and accepted. Presentation is a crucial factor in arguing your case in the thesis. Content alone will not do this.

The written report

Before you begin to write, or even to organise your materials, there are a few things you ought to ask yourself; namely, 'What is the purpose of this thesis?' and 'Who will read this thesis?'. In others words, what is the *aim* and who is the *audience*? Keep the answers to those questions in mind as you work on your presentation. They will help to give it the necessary focus and direction that is required in such work, and will also make it easier for you to organise your thoughts.

The answers to the two questions above are academic-based answers, which will relate to the quality of the thesis itself, as much as to the practical efficacy of its recommendations.

Do keep in mind that no matter what sort of thesis you are presenting, the idea of 'advocacy' should be very high, if not uppermost, in your mind. There is no avoiding this, but it should also not have to be something new for us to learn. All good sales texts convincingly remind us that most of our life is spent selling—generally selling ourselves. Most of the time we just don't notice we are doing this. The underlying awareness of the fact that we are in 'sales mode' helps to polarise our thoughts and keep our material 'directed'. (We are not recommending any sort of mindset that makes you feel like a 'high-pressure' salesperson; merely to remind you that a major underlying purpose of a thesis is to be convincing and persuasive.)

Clarity, conciseness, coherence, proper emphasis on important aspects, meaningful organisation of paragraphs, appropriate transitions from one topic to another, apt choice of words, and specificity are all important for a good thesis. The thesis should be organised in a manner that enhances the smooth flow of materials in a meaningful fashion as the reader progresses.

Do the best you can. Don't try to keep too many writing suggestions in your head at once. You can always revise after you have written things out in a first draft. Try to hold to recommended principles of presentation, but, if it makes expression difficult, just get things down any way you are comfortable with, and revise—and excise—later. It is like collecting data: you can always get rid of what you don't need, but it is nice to have a fair amount to work with at the start.

In order to help you remember the important principles of good thesis writing, here is a checklist that covers what are generally considered to be the major principles:

- *Make sure that your thesis is easy to follow*. The material in the body of the thesis should always be structured in a logical manner. The structure should be apparent, and all the topics easy to find. Different subjects should be indicated by specific headings, with sub-headings where necessary. Generally speaking, paragraphs should be kept short. It is best, too, not to attempt to deal with more than one point per paragraph.
- *Keep the writing clear*. Try to be understood. That sounds obvious, of course, but even experienced writers need to remind themselves of this. If something is 'vague', it might well lead to a misunderstanding in the information that directly follows. It is often necessary to ask another person to read your work to discover this problem.
- *Use good sentence structure*. It is not enough to write sentences that are grammatically correct. Long, convoluted sentences can be 'correct', yet still not make much sense without lengthy consideration on the part of the reader. Decide what you want to say before you write. Again, this may sound fairly obvious, but not keeping it in mind is the most common cause of poor sentence structure.
- *Don't use technical language*. A good rule of thumb to remember is that the reader, not the writer, determines the writing style. Don't 'write down' to people, of course, but don't get technical unless it is absolutely necessary. If you must explain a technical point, decide whether or not the terms ought to be defined, perhaps in an appendix. Common terminology is almost always best.
- *Omit unnecessary detail*. There are times when it is necessary to use a lengthy explanation to get particular points across, but do try to value conciseness and clarity whenever possible.
- *Stress practical action*. The stereotyped researcher is prone to offer theoretically correct, but realistically unworkable, suggestions. Use realistic examples and 'real world' analogies whenever possible to avoid a sense of remoteness.
- *Communicate visually as well as verbally*. Draw attention to themes using headings. Use bold type, bullet points and italics where appropriate. Be consistent in their usage, of course, and don't get too 'cute'. Think of the white space on a page as an element of composition; properly used, it can serve as an important means of focus and emphasis.
- *Use visual devices*. Illustrations, graphs, maps and charts are not only helpful in explaining specific points, but also serve to break up the monotony of text, where that might be a problem. They should have a

legitimate purpose for inclusion, of course, but also give careful consideration to the 'look' and placement of them.

Objectivity

Objectivity is very important in research. Remember that clients hire researchers because they themselves are too close to the issues and cannot be objective. Clients depend on researchers to keep their opinions out of the research in order to make sure it remains objective. The research methods used to obtain data must be objective for the research to be valid, and the way the thesis is presented must reinforce the content by using an objective tone.

In a thesis, it is best to 'depersonalise' the language. The word 'I' is inherently subjective and is not usually used in business theses. As such, when it occurs in a supposedly objective thesis, it tends to evoke feelings of scepticism or mistrust in the reader, so try to avoid prefacing your comments with 'I'. Whenever possible avoid using personal pronouns such as 'I', 'you', 'we' or 'us'. Such an informal style tends to detract from the image of objectivity that a researcher should try to convey.

Generally, the most effective way to do this is to use the passive voice. It is less glaring in this regard, for example, to write: 'As was pointed out earlier … ', than to write: 'I pointed out earlier … '. In reports written by research companies, the company name will often be used as the subject of a sentence instead of resorting to the passive voice. This is considered to give a 'third person' effect, but whether or not it comes across differently from 'I' or 'we' is certainly debatable.

Some written materials, for example study materials from Deakin University, are deliberately written in the first person in order to be more 'conversational'. In a written research report, however, the inherent connotation of 'opinion' in the use of the first person overshadows the advantage of conversational style; for that reason, it is best to avoid using the first person in research reports as much as possible.

In an oral presentation, however, it is generally more acceptable to use personal pronouns, since too much passive speech can sound stilted and even make it seem as if you are not confident about your findings, and want to 'distance yourself' from them.

Decide what is best for you and what best suits your research style on these questions of presentation. The subject matter and methodology will certainly determine your decisions to some degree, but good presentation should not be looked at as a way of 'dressing up' inadequate or incomplete work. Good presentation should be the work's equally well-done counterpart, the intention being to smooth the way for its acceptance, not to put new obstacles in its path.

Potential problems

On the subject of presentation it has often been said that 'a well-done study that is not presented properly is of very little use'. At its worst, this means that the

presentation is so jarring that no-one even cares to examine the value of the information or the ideas presented.

Your work, in that case, is not seen as 'that fascinating exploratory study that we can get real use from', but rather as 'that study by the researcher who spelled "questionnaire" wrong every time it was mentioned'. Fair or not, that is what happens in such situations. Perhaps the most unfortunate thing about such problems is that they are generally quite easy to avoid. A little extra effort is all that is required.

For that reason, we offer some practical words about a few of the more common problems of written presentation. These problems, by the way, are just as prevalent in professional presentations as they are anywhere else.

Spelling

As to spelling, there should not be any spelling mistakes in a report; it is as simple as that. If there are more than one or two, the people who read it will assume the cause to be either ignorance or negligence, and they will be ill-disposed toward you throughout the reading. Spelling mistakes can easily undermine such essentials as clarity, conciseness and coherence by simply being there and drawing attention to themselves and thus away from anything else.

This is a very common problem. For that reason alone, if you take the relatively small effort required to overcome it, your presentation will stand out from most of the others, and the reader will be favourably disposed to you from the start.

Most people who present reports with misspellings do so because they use the spellchecker on their computer, and do nothing more after that. (You will, of course, be using a computer for your report, or have someone else use it for you, to produce your material, and then run it off on a quality printer—your own, someone else's, or a rented one. There are really no other options nowadays.)

The English language is extraordinarily rich in three- and four-letter words; three-letter words, in particular. For this reason alone, a spellcheck will not suffice. If you mean to type, for example: 'This project has been done by … ', but it comes out: 'This project haw been done by … ', it won't trouble your spellchecker in the least. It reads 'haw', thinks you are elaborating upon the third eyelid of a horse, and leaves it there.

The more sophisticated the spellchecker, the more dangerous it is. You want to type: 'We see in the following table … ', but it comes out: 'We seg in the following table … ' The spellchecker sees 'seg', reckons you are still into animals, but have shifted your focus to Scotland, since that is the origin of this term for a castrated bull. So, once again, it sees no reason to mention anything to you.

We often hear someone say: 'But I spellchecked it! How can those mistakes have got by?'. Rather than share their amazement, we should wonder how they

can possibly be so surprised. Avoid this problem by using one of the following simple expedients:

1 Read your work after the spellcheck.
2 If you are a poor speller, have a friend read it.

The other reason not to trust the spellchecker is that it doesn't notice when you forget the really little words; words like 'no'. 'There were no respondents who objected to the personal nature of our questions'. Forget to type that 'no', and your spellchecker will not care. (It *never* cares; none of them do.)

A final remark about what may well be the most common misspelling of all. It is actually a misuse, but once misused, it becomes a misspelling. 'It's' (with the apostrophe between the 't' and the 's') means 'it is' or 'it has'. 'Its' (with no apostrophe anywhere in the word) is the possessive form of the pronoun 'it'. Example: '*It's* been a long time since that dog has been around here. *It's* got *its* tail messed up somehow. *It's* a shame about that'. The difficulty in remembering the difference between the two is understandable; misuse is rife. The wrong usage can be seen on shopfronts, in newspapers, in television subtitles. But, even so, this wrong usage has not reached the 'accepted common usage' stage, nor is it expected to do so.

How do you react to the use of 'he or she', or 'he/she', 's(he)', 'him or her', 'his or hers' every single time a pronoun denoting a human being is required? I find it trying to read or to listen to; it destroys any inherent sense of word rhythm that might have otherwise shown itself. Writing in research reports should not draw attention to itself, but rather to its subject matter. The expedient use of 'she' in the first paragraph, 'he' in the second, 'she' in the third does not solve the problem although it has been sustained throughout a number of lengthy modern textbooks. There is certainly a rhythm there, but it is a maddening one.

How can one possibly not be distracted from the content of the book, paper, or report, when either of the two 'solutions' above are employed? Here is a simple suggestion: Use 'he or she' occasionally. There is no question that it is an appropriate phrase, but don't overdo it (e.g. do not use it three or four times on a page). Another way to get around this is to use a method that is starting to be seen quite often lately—use 'they' and 'their' as singular pronouns. So, the first of the following two sentences is generally recommended over the second:

> 'It was explained to the respondent that their input was most important.'
> 'It was explained to the respondent that his or her input was most important.'

If you prefer to use the second, it is recommended not to use another 'his or her' (or 'her or his') for at least another page or so.

It is often easy to change the noun to plural in order to use 'their' as a plural pronoun, which is even better when you can do it. With the sentence above, you could write: 'It was explained to respondents that their input … '. The best alternative, however, is to reword the sentence wherever possible so that no pronoun is needed. It is surprising how often 'he or she' can be removed without losing anything from the meaning, simply by rethinking the sentence.

Some sentences need breaking up and slightly different modes of expression, but the objective of this exercise—unobtrusiveness—is worth the trouble. Look at this sentence for example: *It could even be something like the feeling you get when you are planning to buy a house, and the real estate agent drives you to see a few in his Mercedes*. 'His' was used because in the incident in mind, the agent was a man. On a second reading, it was just as easy to make it less glaring by spending a few seconds redoing it: *It could even be something like the feeling you get when you are looking at houses to buy, and the real estate agent showing them to you is driving a Mercedes'*.

Commonsense has its place here as well. Decide for yourself if the world is yet ready for 'fisherpersons' or 'personhole covers'. Such words generally draw much too much attention to themselves, and thus destroy any sense of balance in the presentation.

Professional assistance

If you are writing a research report (or any report, for that matter) which is to be disseminated to the public or to a large or specialist audience, you might want to consider engaging a professional to do a final rewrite. A colleague might well be able to recommend someone to you. If not, there are a good number of listings in the Yellow Pages under the heading 'Writers, Consultants &/or Services'. In discussing your requirements with them, be sure you understand the exact extent of the work they offer, and the price for such work.

Again, if your organisation wishes to produce a high-quality report you may wish to avoid the pitfalls of poor presentation, including poor spelling, ungrammatical phrasing, ambiguities, sexist language and poor structure. You might consider it a good investment to have your report professionally edited. This should result in a professional, polished and well-presented report displaying clarity, conciseness, coherence, meaningful organisation of paragraphs, appropriate transitions from one topic to another, and so on. The Society of Editors in each State has a list of available freelancers, or you could contact the publishing department of your local university. As suggested above, it is wise to include price when discussing your requirements and if the editor is freelance you should also ask about previous experience. If your report is crucial to you, investment in such services may well be worthwhile.

Components of a research report

There is comprehensive coverage of this subject in your prescribed texts. However, a few points of emphasis and a suggestion or two might be helpful.

Be sure to state at the outset the *exact* objective of your study. In this way you will be able at the end to relate your conclusions neatly back to that stated objective.

Acknowledge the study's limitations, but be very careful in doing this. If, for example, some of the information you used was not as up-to-date as you would have liked, you will have to say something like: 'The membership list was comprehensive, but not having been updated for a few years, some of the results

of this study may not be precisely representative of the present situation'. (That is not really very good, but you can't lie about it, and it is better than: 'We had to use an old list of members, so this study might not mean anything'.) It is best to remember that 'acknowledging the limitations' is not the same as 'stressing the shortcomings'. Stick to the former.

In professional research reports that entail hundreds of interviews, a similar acknowledgment of limitations is included to cover those strata of the population which are too small to allow legitimate projection to the whole population. Such acknowledgments generally include an explanation of sampling error and standard error. The research company can do everything right, but if a particular stratum is low, the best the company can do is warn you about it.

If your project includes structured or unstructured interviews, include some quotations to add immediacy to the report. Representative quotations should be arranged into groups that emphasise similar or related points, and included in the sub-section that deals with that particular interview question. (No quotation should be used that is traceable to a particular respondent.)

The 'executive summary' or 'abstract'

When a summary is required, do not expect it to be an easy job. For your research report, Deakin University sets a maximum of one page for the executive summary or abstract. The foregoing remarks should convince you that it will be easier, and probably more effective, to get as close to that one page as possible. Writing less than a page will require much more effort for little return.

In the same vein, in evaluating reports, beware of the very short executive summary. Depending upon the nature of the material, even the best researcher may be unable to summarise it well. Check the information in the body of the report which especially interests you, or, even better, get into the habit of reading the whole report.

The following is an example of an abstract:

> The events of October 1997 led the National Gallery of Victoria to take the unprecedented step of closing the exhibition 'A History of Andres Serrano', only two days after it had opened to the public. The ferocity of public sentiment attests to the power images have to arouse hot feelings. It has been suggested that museums are safe places for the display of contentious material because they are culturally cool thereby providing some sort of neutral ground for the playing out of contested ideas. However museums are themselves culturally loaded sites and as the events of October 1997 illustrate are also subject to contestations of meaning by various groups. The outrage that erupted over Andres Serrano's photographs tapped into issues about the role of the state institution in the maintenance of a cultural hegemony. The museum is perceived to play a part in the affirmation of dominant Western values, not challenge these precepts which Serrano's work does.
>
> Furthermore the reaction against Serrano's images was compounded by photography's recent inclusion to the halloed halls of high art. The medium itself, still something of an outsider, is at odds with the revered canon of oil on

> canvas and the reaction to the images was very much bound up in these terms—people responded to them as photographs not as art. In addition to this is contemporary art's mission to shock and destabilise the ideologies upon which we operate in society which leads to a consideration of the tricky balance between censorship and freedom of expression and the importance of the museum as mediator between contentious works and the general public. The power of images to provoke is placed within the wider picture of the history of iconoclasm and the specific cultural and political climate of Melbourne is seen to contribute to the hostilities that surfaced.
>
> (Doolan 1999)

Acknowledgments

The acknowledgments section deserves careful thought. It is important not to forget to include anyone who has had an advisory role in your research project, including other researchers, students, technical or support staff, lecturers, and so on.

This is also the section where copyright holders are thanked for having given their permission to include their works, or sections of their works, in the research report. Have a look at the imprint page (i.e. the very first page) in the study guides and the readers for the units in Arts and Entertainment Management for examples of acknowledgment sections. The readers will, of course, usually include more acknowledgments than the study guides.

On the subject of copyright, by the way, we may reproduce a single extract of up to 400 words, or up to 600 words in several extracts from a single work if no continuous extract exceeds 300 words, from a separately published work without seeking permission, though we must include full acknowledgment of the source. We must seek the copyright holder's permission to reproduce any copyright artistic work, such as illustrations, graphs and photographs.

When a research report is produced for a client, the client generally has the right to use it in whatever way they see fit. However, if you are not being paid by an employer or client to write the report, you should consider including the copyright symbol (the circled 'c') followed by your name on the imprint page or at the end of the report, so as to emphasise your control over copyright in the report, including how the report, or parts of it, might possibly be reproduced.

The literature review

It is recommended that you review the material related to literature reviews in topic 5 now that we have reached the stage where the literature review, or literature survey, is actually inserted as part of the introductory section of the research report. The literature survey, unlike other components of the research report, is meant to be completed early in the research process. In this way it can be referred to, and employed, in succeeding stages.

Appendices

Appendices are meant to provide materials that are supplementary to those in the body of the report. These often include expanded information, for example, detailed computations from which tables shown in the report have been generated. A blank copy of any questionnaire should be included as an

appendix along with (if relevant) the interviewer instructions, an explanation of how the sample size was calculated, and so on.

It might help to consider the appendices as containing the sort of information which, if it were included in the body of the report, would disrupt the logical flow of information. However, the report itself should refer to each appendix and explain (briefly) its significance. (If your report does not include a reference to a certain appendix, you should reconsider why you need to include that appendix.)

Appendices should be positioned as a continuation of your report. A table of contents for the appendices is often desirable.

Pictorial representation

Any charts or graphs used must be clearly—and completely—labelled. Here is a good rule of thumb about charts, graphs or tables: assume that some people will not look at them at all, and that some people will look at them alone, ignoring the entire text of your report. If you can satisfy that rule—putting enough key data into the written part of the report for the reader, and making the charts clear and comprehensive enough for the chart lover—you have every right to be pleased with yourself.

Perhaps the most common problem with tables and graphs is insufficient labelling. Remember that they should always contain the following:

- *Table or figure number*. This allows for easy location in the report.
- *Title*. This should be carefully chosen, so as to clearly indicate the contents of the table or figure.
- *Other labelling information*. These include elements such as a key, a legend, the names of each axis of a graph, or the captions or the labels for the columns in a table. This information is usually contained in the *boxhead* or *stub end*.
- *Footnotes* A footnote can explain or qualify a particular section, or a particular item, in a table or a figure.

Oral presentation

An oral presentation should not cover everything in the written report. Basic background material, key findings and the conclusions and/or recommendations are sufficient. The percentage of information retained by someone listening to an oral presentation is very small, which is why it can never take the place of a written report.

Therefore, in an oral presentation, as a general rule, do not overwhelm your audience with too many statistical tables or other tabular information. Use charts and slides and any other visual aids you wish, but think of them as *reinforcing* the points you wish to make. Think of it too as entertainment, if you wish. But if the ‘show business’ part overshadows the information itself, there will almost certainly be a problem. You will have created a situation analogous to those occasional ‘great’ advertisements we see on TV. The advertisements

are unforgettable, but what's the name of the sponsor? 'Haven't got a clue', is the usual response. So how great an advertisement was it then?

In the business environment, research companies will often have their best speakers present reports, even if they are not the ones most knowledgeable about them. The researchers themselves are present, however. That way any difficult questions that might be posed by the audience can still be answered. (This is of little practical use to you as a student, of course, but take it as a reminder that handling questions at the end of the presentation is extremely important. Make up some questions yourself to practise on. You know the material best, so it is likely that you can predict most—if not all—of the questions which might be asked.)

If the findings are not what were hoped for, you cannot very well hide that fact, but keep your words as objective as possible, and continue that in the course of fielding any questions afterwards.

It would be difficult here to cover a great deal about public speaking, but there are a few simple but remarkably effective exercises worth mentioning. They are recommended by Doug Malouf as ways to combat one of the most common causes of poor public speaking—the failure to practise.

To Malouf's advice can be added an excellent list of what is required in order to speak well in public. This list is from the section entitled 'Speaking in public', from *How to Write and Speak Better*:

- Directing your words as often as possible to distant parts of the room.
- Talking clearly in an unaffected or conversational manner without shouting.
- A pleasantly varied voice that readily expresses shades of meaning.
- Direct appeal or challenge, the speaker looking at as many of the audience as possible in the eyes as often as he conveniently can.
- A manner of presenting carefully organised material that makes progress from point to point perfectly clear.
- Facial expressions that show an interest in the matters being talked about.
- Responding, as far as possible, to the way in which the audience is receiving the talk—for example, by trying to be livelier or by cutting out some of the material if you suspect the listeners are becoming bored.
- Avoiding mannerisms such as fidgeting with clothing or objects.
- Avoiding using many of the 'fillers'—such as 'er', 'ah', 'you know'—of ordinary speech.
- Standing still, without standing stiffly, unless there is some reason to move from one position to another. Strolling about distracts the audience, but leaving the lectern to tell an anecdote not only varies the picture that the audience sees but makes a helpful break in a long explanation. The speaker should will himself into feeling relaxed from the hips up while standing up straight.
- Not apologising for yourself. The audience will find faults readily enough without your advertising them. They will also tell quickly if you are earnestly trying to do a good job.

(Gunn 1975, pp. 359–60)

You might find it helpful to remember that your delivery should focus around five key physical skills:

- eye contact;
- facial expression;
- vocal projection;
- stance; and
- gestures.

Here is a 'crib sheet' of the points made in the order they are discussed. Copy it on a card, and glance at it to stay on track. Do not use any other notes.

- **Direct the report to whom?**
- **Selling the report**
- **Easy-to-follow report**
- **Write clearly**
- **Sentence structure**
- **Technical language**
- **Unnecessary detail**
- **Practical action**
- **Typography**
- **Visual devices**
- **'I' is bad; 'our' is good**
- **Cannot 'dress up' poor work**
- **Why a good study should be well-presented**
- **Mistakes in spelling**
- **Spellchecker**
- **Non-discriminatory language**
- **'Their' as a solution**
- **Professional assistance**

Although it will probably not be a problem for you with your present project, it is good to remember generally that whenever you are planning to present a report (or give any sort of speech, for that matter), try to check the venue beforehand. If you need any special equipment (whiteboard, overhead projector, or slide projector, microphone, video recorder, etc.) be sure that they are available and working (the whiteboard marker has plenty of ink, the light on the overhead projector is working, the microphone is properly connected and set at the correct volume, the video recorder is on the right channel). Check out the equipment when you arrive even if you have been promised that it will be there for you. See that slide carousels are what you had expected, that a pointer is available if you need it, that the lectern is suitable for your notes, that audience seating has been arranged in a manner conducive to your talk. Check any materials for distribution which have been photocopied or produced for you by the venue organisers.

When professional speakers compare notes with each other about bad experiences they have had, these experiences invariably relate to unexpected

problems with the venue. While venue organisers will do their best to assist you by ensuring that all is properly prepared, we all know that mistakes occur and equipment can break down. It is your responsibility to check that everything is in readiness so that your presentation will run smoothly and look professional.

Review

Summary

This topic considered the final stage of the research process—writing and presenting the research report. It stressed the importance of presentation as a reflection of the work done. An objectively presented report enhances the impression that the work itself was objectively carried out and the data objectively considered. This should be a true impression, since good presentation is not meant to mask deficiencies in the study at hand, but rather to give it the good face it presumably deserves.

The components of a research report were considered, and practical tips on oral presentation were discussed. The topic concluded with a general list of hints for speaking in public.

References

Doolan, W. 1999, Too hot to handle: A history of Andres Serrano, A history of mania and mayhem in the museum, Unpublished PhD thesis, Deakin University, Melbourne.

Gunn, J. S. (ed.) 1975, *How to Write and Speak Better*, Reader's Digest, Sydney.