

CHAPTER 5

Seminar skills

In seminars there is nowhere to hide – well generally not, occasionally so many students will be packed into one classroom it will be like a game of sardines, but normally seminars are smaller friendlier sessions (they are). They are one of the backbones of learning at university, yet many people find them to be a little daunting. They are much more interactive than a lecture (eek!) and the prospect of having to speak up (ahh!) and share ideas (double ahh!) or to offer critique of our peers (triple ahh!), lecturers (can I leave now please!?) and weekly readings can be very challenging. Worse, in some seminars you will be asked to give formal presentations or engage in group work (call me a taxi!). Yet, for all these concerns, seminars are often the place where most learning happens, and should be a place to test out ideas and push the boundaries of our thinking before writing assessed essays or undertaking exams. With the importance of seminars in mind, this chapter will help you survive seminars, while making useful contributions and giving effective presentations. This chapter will also talk about how to work in groups and how to manage different personalities and skills in group work projects. This will draw upon case studies to help tackle issues in a pragmatic way.



How to cite this book chapter:

Specht, D. 2019. *The Media And Communications Study Skills Student Guide*. Pp. 47–59. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book42.e>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

What is a seminar?

The word seminar comes from the Latin *sēminārium*, which literally means the place for sowing the seed of knowledge, and that is really just what they are. They are designed to provide you with an opportunity to develop your knowledge and understanding of a subject and to practise a variety of academic skills. While they are normally run under the direction of a lecturer or experienced PhD student, the success of the session depends upon the willingness of students (and that includes you) to contribute their own ideas. And your willingness to challenge both your peers and lectures in a constructive and supportive manner. There are six things you can do to help you get the most out of your seminars, and to give the most too.

1. Be responsible for what happens in the classroom

This one might seem obvious from what has been said above, and it is a rather tired cliché to say that you will get out what you put in, however, this couldn't be more true in a seminar. This is your moment to ask all the questions you might have, and to listen to the answers your peers give. Chances are, if you want to ask a question, then someone else will be wondering the same, so pushing yourself to ask is really important. Likewise, the lecturer leading the session is hoping that you will get involved, and so would always rather have 20 questions than a silent room. So come prepared to get stuck in!

2. Come ready to learn

Again, this sounds obvious, but it is more than just remembering to bring a pen – although this is important too. Coming ready to learn means putting everything else in your life to one side for the hour or so of the class. It means doing the readings before the class. It means putting your phone on silent in your bag and closing social media on your laptop. It means more than just being in the room, it means being present. I know there are many other pressures on our lives, partners, family, jobs or even having a cold, but as much as possible, try and leave these things at the classroom door. Much like with active listening, active participation actually requires a great deal of effort and you should be feeling pretty tired by the time the seminar is over... don't forget that pen and notebook too though!



Ask questions!, lots of questions!

Before I go to the lecture, I ask myself what I know about this topic and try to systemize some information I know. During the lecture or seminar, I ask tutors questions to get more clarity or gain more knowledge. After the class, I write a summary (3–5 points) of what I've learned on this topic of the subject.

Mavluda – MA Public Relations

3. Pick the best seat in the house

Where is the best place to sit? Does it really matter all that much, unless you steal the comfy lecturer's chair before they arrive, all the seats are the same, aren't they? No, they really aren't. Where we sit in a room can make a huge amount of difference. Being too close to a radiator or drafty window can make us too hot or cold to learn. Sitting with the sun in our eyes will be a great distraction too. Sitting at the back can make it tempting to disengage or work on other things (we can still see you!). Also consider who you are sitting next to, do they inspire or distract you? Choosing the best seat (for you) can make the seminar so much more pleasurable, and will help you to get the most from sessions.

4. Take two sets of notes

This is surely the most outrageous piece of advice in this whole book! Two sets of notes? *How?* A pencil in each hand? Impossible! That isn't quite what I mean. Instead I mean you should take notes at two different times. The first set you should make while you are in the class. These will of course be quick, short-hand notes scribbled down in a rush. The second set then become even more important, they should be written as soon as the class finishes. This second set of notes is more detailed and written out in full sentences. These notes not only help you consolidate your learning, but they will also serve as better revision notes when you come to exams and writing essays – Don't leave it too long before making the second set, remember (!) we are all pretty bad at remembering things.

5. Take advantage of the opportunity to connect.

This is one of the more fun parts of a seminar. Your seminars are going to be filled with ideas from all over the world, and these will really help expand your thinking (See chapter 12 on shifting perspectives). Better than this though, your colleagues are from all over the world, and will all be moving into working in similar industries to you. So why not use your seminars to also make connections, communicate with people who you may be working with in the future, or even to exchange some invitations to visit other countries on a more sociable basis... or as I like to call them, free holidays!

6. Be a regular student.

Unfortunately, these tips only work if you are in the room, and again it sounds like a bit of a cliché to say you need to go to class, but you really do. Your tutors spend a great deal of time planning the trajectory of lectures and seminars, and so missing one or more of them means you will lose this flow. So, make sure you check your timetable before booking flights during holiday time, and speak with your boss (if you work) to ensure you get to all your seminars – They really are the chance to expand your thinking and get the most from your degree.

Surviving group work

I can almost hear you groan now, that collective sigh that echoes around a seminar room when there is the mention of group work. The realization that arguments over workloads, opinions and styles will surely follow. And the sense that all it takes is one person not pulling their weight to pull down everyone's grade is enough to drive you crazy. It doesn't have to be this way, group work can be one of the most fulfilling and rewarding aspects of your studies, and it is also often a very important part of working in the media and communications industry. It takes some extra effort to get it right, but doing so will help you now in your studies and in future work. A good place to start is the six stages of effective group work:



Let's look at each of these more closely.

1. Principle of individualization

Sounds complex, but it just means that everyone learns at their own pace, and in their own way. It is important to realize this as we start group work. Just because we think about or understand the world in a particular way, doesn't mean everyone, or even anyone, else in our group will think or learn in that way.

2. Goal setting

All group work begins with a discussion of objectives/purpose. You should determine what tasks are needed in order to complete the goal

of your group work. You should also agree who is best suited to each of these tasks and divide up the responsibility – keeping in mind the *principle of individualization*. Once responsibilities are agreed, deadlines should be set – including any periodical evaluation that might be needed – don't just meet up again at the last minute!

3. Fact finding

This part is often something done solo, and that isn't a bad idea. Allowing each member of the group to gather the data they have been assigned means a range of opinions about that information will also be brought to the table. However, do be empathetic to workloads and learning styles as you assign who will research what.

4. Active listening

When you meet up with your group again, it is really important to engage in active listening as others present what they have found. Reserve your judgement until they have presented their ideas and remember the shape of your project is built upon multiple ideas and should not be shoe-horned into preconceptions. Use some RASA to help with this process (See chapter 6).

5. Production

Only now can you actually begin the process of producing any solid work. Just like all work the collective planning process will help you to produce much better work together. Again, return to the principle of individualization as you assign tasks in the production of your final project output.

6. Evaluation

This should be an ongoing process, but once production comes to an end you should measure the quality of the groups experience in relation to the objectives of the task. This will help to ensure you have reached the goal to the best of the group's *collective* ability.

The role of empathy

The greatest way to solving any issues with group work is by taking an empathetic approach. Empathy is at its simplest is an awareness of others' feelings, needs and concerns – and this is linked to individualization. While 'empathy is intuitive', comedian Tim Minchin (2013: n.p.), reminds us that it is 'something we can work on and get better at'. Look at the case study below and we can see how it might help in group work.

**CASE
STUDY**

Tom, Mohammad and Xi are working on a group project. They have all been doing research for a week or so, and are now going to bring in their work. When the group meets up Tom hasn't brought anything with him. Mohammad and Xi get really angry at Tom and start shouting at him. No work gets done during the session. They call it quits and decide that Tom needs to do his work before they meet again. A week later they are set to meet, but now Tom doesn't even turn up. Mohammad and Xi are even more annoyed and complain to the teacher that the task is unfair.

What could they have done differently?

How might this have worked if they had employed some empathy.

When Tom arrived with no work, they might have started by asking him if everything was ok – often there is a reason that people haven't done their work. If they had done this, they would have found that Tom was having to look after his child this week. He had been trying to do the work, but just hadn't managed to and was embarrassed about it. A second meeting might still need to be arranged, or workloads changed, but shouting and being angry meant that Tom also didn't want to come to the next meeting, and the work stopped being a priority. A little empathy might have saved complaints and embarrassment.

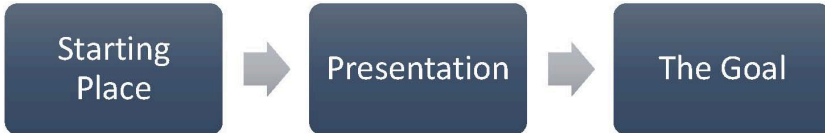
There are only two types of speakers in the world. The nervous and liars

MARK TWAIN



Presentations

Very few people like giving presentations and everyone gets nervous about the process. There are a few simple things we can do though that will help us get through a presentation. Let's first look at what a presentation really is;



Three steps to a presentation (Kangas, 2012).

Not that complex really. The whole point of a presentation is to leave your audience changed in some way: a change in their feelings, their ideas or their way of thinking. That is your **goal**. To do a good presentation you need to consider where you audience is starting and where you want them to be when you finish speaking. Pretty straightforward.

For example in a presentation about a research proposal your audience starts knowing a great deal about research and often about the topic you will discuss, but they know nothing about why your research project is a good idea, or how you plan to do it. You need to move them from being knowledgeable about the subject, to being interested and excited about the new things you will be contributing to the subject and field. Once you know the journey you want to take them on you should write it down as a bullet pointed story. Don't open PowerPoint yet, instead work through step-by-step the point(s) you need to get across, to get your audience to the goal – keep in mind the time given for your presentation. Nobody likes someone who runs over their time limit!

How to prepare your slides


Once you have your story drafted, let's look at making slides. Your slides should be designed to support your talk, not the other way around, so it is important you know what you want to talk about before you even open your computer to make a presentation. When you are ready to start making your slides there are just five simple rules to preparing a good PowerPoint presentation, but before we get on to those, take a look at the following real life slides and see if you can make some notes about what is wrong with them:

OUR PLATFORM

Input: **Photos**
Video
Live stream
Other media

Deliverables: Full face recognition
and recreation
Fun

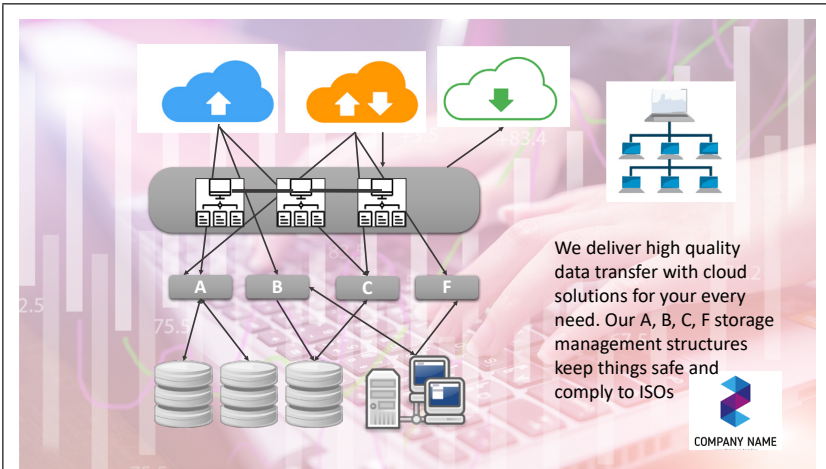
other: **Better than others, and safe**



COMPANY NAME

Slide 9 / 120

Note the things wrong with this slide:



Note the things wrong with this slide:

Ok, so those were clearly very bad slides, so here are our five rules for making a much better slide deck:

1

Each slide should contain no more than 1 idea. It might be a big idea or a small idea, but there should only be one.

1 + 1 = 0

Our brains can't read and listen at the same time, so if our slides are different to our speech our audience don't hear either. Your slides should support your words – but don't just read them.

Size matters

Eyes really like looking at bigger objects, so consider making the most important information biggest, not just the title.

Contrast

Our eyes like contrasting colours, but avoid using pure black and white. Instead use dark text on light backgrounds and avoid green, red/pink tones to make your slides accessible to all, including those with visual impairments.



Our brains try to count objects subconsciously. Limit the number of objects (text, pictures, graphs) to three per slide. This means the brain can concentrate on the presentation.

But this means I need more slides!!!

Yes! That is true, if you only have one idea per slide, and only three objects on a slide then you might well need more slides. This isn't a bad thing³. The important thing is to practise the presentation to ensure it runs to the right length

³ Although some people will tell you it is.

of time. Even a one-slide presentation can run over time if not practised, and a 40-slide presentation can end up too short when nervous. So, use as many slides as you need to follow the above rules, and then follow the rules below to ensure good timing.

* * *

So now we have the rules for making a good presentation, we need to think about how we present ourselves too. Dale Carnegie (2017/1936), author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, once said that:



There are always three speeches, for every one you actually gave. The one you practiced, the one you gave, and the one you wish you gave

DALE CARNEGIE

And he isn't wrong, but we can try to ensure that our presentations are the best possible by doing a little bit of preparation of ourselves, and thinking about how we approach the speech.

Of course, you will always start with plenty of research. A presentation, just like everything else you do, requires careful planning and preparation. Make sure you are well versed in the subject that you are going to be presenting on, keep in mind the three-step model from the top of this section to help ensure your presentation moves people to your goal.

You should then make some notes on small cards – use cards so they don't flap with nervous hands, and keep them to bullet point notes as a prompt; there is nothing worse than listening to someone simply read from a sheet of paper – bullet point notes will help keep you more natural.

And now, practice! Make sure you read through your presentation aloud (with any visuals). If possible, get a friend to help with this and to give you some tips, or try videoing yourself so you can see how well you do. Practice will mean

you don't need to use the cards so much, and this will help you to feel more confident.

Now, we have a presentation and we know what we will say, how do you deliver it? Well, the delivery starts before we open our mouths. Ensure you arrive in good time for the presentation. Enter the room or approach the stage with a smile, this will help relax your audience, and will produce endorphins that will help you relax too – no need for a shot of whisky, just a smile will do. Be sure to introduce yourself before you start talking. And as you proceed through your talk keep your body language open – don't fold your arms or hide behind a lectern screen or your notes – and make eye contact with people in the room. If you are worried about this, then look at people's foreheads, they will feel like you are looking and them, and they will engage with your talk. Make sure you don't stare at one person, though; you don't want people to think you're creepy.

Think about how you use your voice, slow deliberate sentences are good to make points clear, but become dull if the whole talk is slow. Keep an eye on your time, and ensure that you reach a strong conclusion – leave this up as your last slide, so people can see it during questions. Don't then run away, but thank the audience for listening, accept any applause, and then smile as you leave the stage. If it is an assessed talk you may be given feedback right away, so be prepared to take some notes or to answer questions before you leave.

We all get nervous giving presentations, the difference between those who let the nerves get the better of them and those who don't, comes in the preparation, and for the most part in the research. Before you make any presentation be clear about what you want people to take away at the end of the *show*; remember as Lilly Walters has said 'The success of your presentation will be judged not by the knowledge you send but by what the listener receives'. And always heed the advice of philosopher Hannah Arendt:



Prepare for the worst; expect the best; and take what comes.

HANNAH ARENDT

Summary

Seminars ask you to engage with a huge range of activities. We have covered some of those here, including how to be an active member of the class, how to engage in group work, and how to give presentations, both in a seminar and beyond. You may also be called upon to undertake other activities too, so keep an open mind as you attend your seminars and be ready to engage. Your seminars are the very best place to learn. They give you a chance to try out new ideas, to challenge yourself, to push the limits of your thinking and to practise new skills. They are also the place where you can ask questions and clarify points with your lecturers and classmates – as well as plan some exciting futures together – so make you take full advantage of every seminar.

References

- Carnegie, D. (2017 [1936]). *How to win friends and influence people*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Kangas, G. (2012). Giving presentations worth listening to. TEDxEMU [Online] Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUXkThfQx6A>. Accessed March 2019.
- Minchin, T. (2013). Occasional Addresses [Online] Available from: <https://www.timminchin.com/2013/09/25/occasional-address/> Accessed February 2019.
- Turkle, S. (2010). Interview Sherry Turkle. PBS Frontline [Online] Available from: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/digitalnation/interviews/turkle.html> Accessed March 2019.

