

ASSIGNING ORAL PRESENTATIONS

Faculty Resource Series

Oral presentations—whether formal like a conference-style talk or informal like summarizing a reading to the class—offer students a chance to practice the important real-world skill of talking about their work to others, and are commonly assigned in many classes across campus. However, for many students, oral presentations can be a huge source of anxiety or even completely inaccessible. This guide is intended to explain why oral presentations can be inaccessible for many students, and give you strategies for assigning oral presentations well in your classes.¹

Why are students so anxious to give oral presentations?

It is not uncommon for many people (especially introverted people) to feel some amount of “stage fright” when being asked to speak to a large group. But other factors can compound normal anxiety:

- **Speech disabilities** (like stutters or tics) can create self-conscious feelings when speaking publicly
- **Limited English language proficiency** can create feelings of anxiety when speaking publicly ([Grieve, Woodley, Hunt, & McKay \(2021\)](#) explain that traditional speaking anxiety is higher in students who already feel “othered”)
- **Limited technical knowledge** on a subject can increase fear of judgment and anxiety when speaking publicly
- **Effects of social isolation from COVID-19** have increased student anxiety levels generally ([Fruehwirth, Biswas, & Perreira, 2021](#)), and especially in public speaking ([Prentiss, 2021](#))

You may find students with one or more of these factors requesting not to do a presentation, to do it privately, or even be willing to take a “0” rather than struggle through a presentation.

How to assign oral presentations well

For many professions and disciplines, publicly speaking about your work whether to a small group or large audience is a critical communication skill. It is our job to help students learn how to do this well, but without traumatizing them or creating even more anxiety around speaking tasks. Here we provide some *dos* and *don'ts* for how to create these assignments:

¹ Much of the information in this guide is drawn from Ringler, H. (2023, July 17-18). *Developing accessible oral presentation assignments* [Conference presentation]. Conference of Writing Program Administrators, Reno, NV, United States.

- ✓ **Do assign realistic genres of speaking tasks.** Unless students are explicitly preparing for a career in research, consider avoiding the standard conference-style presentation, and instead assigning students more realistic and situated types of oral presentations that align with the course learning outcomes, like a group project report or podcast. Students with anxiety around public speaking are often more willing and enthusiastic to give the presentation if they see it as helpful to their careers, rather than just an extra or “fun” final assignment.

- ✗ **Don’t assume that assigning (or forcing) more oral speaking tasks will help** students get over their anxieties. While this may work for some people, for others with serious anxieties, it can exacerbate the problem. Students may decide not to take your class at all, or avoid and mentally “check out” of the class and learning, simply to avoid speaking. Additionally, on the chance that their presentation goes poorly, this will serve as negative reinforcement.

- ✓ **Do give explicit instruction in giving effective oral presentations.** Help students to analyze examples of presentations, pointing out how they are structured and what works in them and why. In doing so, you’ll help students understand what is expected of them and see the presentation as a regular communication task.

- ✗ **Don’t assume that having students discuss or talk to peers will reduce speaking anxiety.** Many classes include some element of discussion or group work, and we tend to assume that letting students discuss with peers will be less anxiety-inducing since their conversation partners are peers. Indeed, research does show that familiarity and repeated exposure to an audience seems to help people with public speaking anxiety. However, peers are not necessarily familiar to students simply by being peers. Only have students work in groups or present to large audiences to the extent that it aligns with learning outcomes.

- ✓ **Do allow for and provide systems of support.** As possible, allow students to work with classmates who they already know and are comfortable with, to record their presentations in a video or audio form, or to present only to a small group rather than the whole class.

In short, do assign oral communication tasks, but do so in a way that research suggests will help, rather than traumatize, anxious students.