



Presentations and seminars: structuring a short talk.

A ten-minute presentation is not a lecture read aloud. It is a short argued sequence of ideas that a room can follow once, at speaking pace. This document covers how to structure it, how to design the slides, and how to defend it once the questions begin.

1 The ten-minute talk, timed

A short talk is budgeted the way a short essay is: decide what each minute is for before you write anything. The figures below are a working plan, not an institutional rule — the shape most examiners expect.

Stage	Minutes	What has to happen
Opening	1.0	The hook and the question, in plain words. No title-slide reading.
Question	0.5	State the aim as one answerable sentence, then stop.
Method	2.0	What you did and why, at the level the room needs — no more.
Results	3.5	The one figure that carries the answer, plus the trend around it.
Conclusion	2.0	The answer, its limit, and one next step.
Questions	1.0	Your own buffer, spent inside the ten, not borrowed from it.

METHOD Time the talk against this table in rehearsals. If a stage overruns, cut detail — never the conclusion.

2 The five-slide skeleton

1 Title and the question

Your name, the aim, and the single sentence the talk exists to answer.

2 Why it matters

One reason the room should care. This is where attention is won or lost.

3 Method

A simple diagram of what you did — a flow, not a paragraph of prose.

4 Results

One clear figure or table, captioned so it can be read from the back of the room.

5 Conclusion

The answer, its uncertainty or limit, and what you would do next.

ONE IDEA PER SLIDE

Each slide makes one point, and its title states that point. If a slide needs two headings, it is two slides. A room reads a slide in a few seconds: if the title alone does not carry the message, the slide is a document, not a slide.

THE SLIDE IS NOT THE SCRIPT

The slide is a backdrop; the script is what you say. Text written to be read silently competes with the sentence you are speaking, so the room stops listening. Put statements on the slide and keep the explanation in your voice.

3 A seminar is not a lecture

Dimension	Lecture	Seminar
Who speaks	Mostly the lecturer.	Mostly the students; the tutor steers.
Your preparation	Attend and take notes.	Read set material and come with two written points.
What succeeds	Accurate notes you will review.	A contribution that moves the group's argument on.
Your role	Listener.	Participant — expected to speak, question and respond.

NOTE In a seminar, silence is read as unpreparedness. Bring something to say, and say it early.

4 Six ways a short talk fails

- ❑ **No question.** The talk describes a topic instead of answering one.
- ❑ **Too much method.** Ten minutes spent on a procedure that carries two.
- ❑ **Reading the slides.** The room reads ahead and stops listening.

- ❑ **A hidden conclusion.** The answer arrives only in the last five seconds.
- ❑ **Overrun.** The conclusion is cut because the introduction ran long.
- ❑ **No rehearsal out loud.** A talk read silently is always longer when spoken.



4 Design on evidence, not taste

Slide design has a research literature. Mayer's work on multimedia learning sets out principles for how words and pictures should be combined, and cognitive load theory explains why the same principles hold: the channel through which a room takes in information is narrow, and every unnecessary element competes for it. Three of Mayer's named principles do most of the practical work.

COHERENCE

People learn better when extraneous material is excluded rather than included.

SIGNALLING

People learn better when the essential material is highlighted — a heading, an arrow, a single emphasis.

REDUNDANCY

People learn better from narration and picture together than from the same words also printed on screen.

"People learn better when extraneous material is excluded rather than included."

Mayer (2009), multimedia learning — the coherence principle

SOURCES Mayer, R. E. (2009). *Multimedia Learning* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. Sweller, J., Ayres, P., & Kalyuga, S. (2011). *Cognitive Load Theory*. Springer.

5 One slide, before and after

The same slide, two ways. Each fault on the left is fixed by a named principle on the right. This is what the principles look like when they are applied.

BEFORE — CROWDED AND COMPETING

- A decorative background image sits behind the text and eats the contrast.
- Full sentences of explanation are printed on screen and read aloud at the same time.
- Six equal bullets, none marked, so nothing is signalled as the point.
- Clip-art added because the slide looked empty.

AFTER — ONE IDEA, PLAINLY

- **Coherence.** The background and clip-art are removed; only the idea stays.
- **Redundancy.** The printed sentence is cut, so the narration does not compete with it.
- **Signalling.** One heading and one arrow mark the figure that carries the answer.
- **Result.** The slide can be read in five seconds; the room listens to you.

6 Type, contrast and colour

Rule	Why it holds
Type size	Body text large enough to read from the back of the room; if you must shrink it to fit, you have too much on the slide.
Contrast	Dark text on a light ground, or the reverse. Grey-on-grey and text over photographs are read as blanks.
Colour	Two or three colours used consistently. Colour marks structure, not decoration.
Consistency	The same font, size and position for the same kind of content on every slide.

DO NOT READ YOUR SLIDES ALOUD

The audience reads faster than you speak, so a slide of full sentences is finished before you are — and no one is listening. Say the sentence; show the keyword or the figure. If a slide must be read to be understood, it should be a handout, not a slide.

7 Design under load — the case for one template

Cognitive load theory holds that novices learn more from worked examples and clear guidance than from unguided problem-solving. The design advice follows: do not design each slide from nothing. Build one slide you are happy with — title, one idea, one figure — and reuse its layout, so your effort goes on the content rather than on inventing a new look five times over.

EVIDENCE Sweller, Ayres & Kalyuga (2011), *Cognitive Load Theory*, Springer.



7 Rehearsal: four runs, not one

Run	When	What it fixes
1	Alone, early	The shape. Speak it aloud, untimed, and cut anything that does not serve the question.
2	Two days later	Time. Run it against the budget and trim to fit.
3	Day before	One listener who is not an expert tells you where they lost the thread.
4	Morning of	Opening two minutes and the closing sentence only. Start and finish well.

THE OPENING TWO MINUTES

- **Sentence one:** the question, in plain words.
- **Sentence two:** why it matters to this room.
- **Sentence three:** the road map — "how we did it, then what we found".
- **Then stop.** No apology, no reading the title slide.

8 Handling questions — a tactics table

Type of question	How to respond
Factual and straight	Answer in one sentence, then stop. Do not pad a complete answer.
"Why did you choose...?"	Give the reason, and name what you gave up by choosing it.
Hostile or challenging	Restate the objection fairly, answer the substance, concede what is true.
Outside your scope	Say so plainly, and say what you would check before answering.
"I don't know"	Say it — then how you would find out, or name it as a limit to test next.
Several at once	Separate them, answer one, and park the rest in writing.

9 Managing time, and the poster version

KEEPING TO TIME

- Put a clock where you can see it, or ask a friend to signal halfway.
- If you are behind, cut detail from Results and Method — never the conclusion.
- Finish on the sentence you planned, even if you dropped material to reach it.

THE POSTER, IF THAT IS THE FORMAT

Open with the size your institution sets for the session — A0 and A1 are common. Use three columns and a reading path that runs top-left, down, then right, as a page is read. Title, author and aim sit in the top band.

Leave out dense paragraphs, the full reference list, decorative images and everything you know. Keep a 60-second and a three-minute version.

10 The handout is not the slides

A handout is read, not watched. Where the slides stay spare, it can carry the sentences, the method detail and a short reference list — the material that would crowd a screen. Give it a title, the one figure, and the conclusion, so a reader who missed the session still has the argument.

WHAT GOES WHERE

- **Slide:** one idea, a keyword, the figure.
- **Handout:** the sentences, the detail, the sources.
- **Voice:** the explanation that joins the two.

11 Twelve things an examiner or judge looks for

- A question stated in one sentence that the talk then answers.
- A structure the room can follow without notes.
- One idea per slide, each title carrying the point.
- Slides readable from the back of the room.
- Extraneous material removed, essentials signalled.
- A results figure that supports the stated answer.
- A conclusion that is not new information.
- Honest limits: uncertainty, assumptions, what was not tested.
- Answers that give the reason, not just the result.
- An honest "I don't know" where it applies, with a next step.
- Finishing within time, on your own planned sentence.
- Eye contact with the room, not with the slides.