

# Getting the key points across: presenting your paper effectively

## We're often asked to present our papers

It could be to your senior management team, a senior officials group, or at a Minister's meeting or Cabinet Committee. Typically this requires the author of the paper (supported by their manager) to deliver a pithy convincing summary of the paper to set the tone for the discussion to follow.

It's not easy. And some of us never get comfortable with it. But it's a crucial skill for any policy analyst or manager.

This Masterclass provides tips and tricks to help you present your paper effectively.

## Don't take a paper as read...

Often, we hear the Chair of these sorts of meetings say we should 'take the paper as read'. **Don't.**

Some may not have read it thoroughly or absorbed it fully. They are busy people and have lots of issues on their plates. So a reminder of the critical issues is helpful.

It's also a chance to get your perspective across and position the issues from your analytical point of view. It also allows you to address any issues that have arisen in the meantime – so they are headed off at the pass.<sup>1</sup>

## Impressions count

While it might not be their first impression (they will have had the paper and/or will have met you before), there's no doubt that how you come across will make a difference in how your advice is perceived.

It will give decision-makers confidence in your written advice if you come across as authoritative.

So you'll need to be:

- confident in tone, and able to answer any questions that may be asked
- across the issues – using data, presenting the key points and major trade-offs, knowing the history of the issue, and the connections between issues
- thorough – identifying risks and understanding different perspectives on the issue.

## Keep it short

And you'll need to do all of this in a very short time!

Going too long cuts into the time for discussion – meetings are usually tightly scheduled, so there is limited time for each item.

You can quickly turn people off by rambling on, which undermines your messages. The touchstone is to deal with issues at a high level – summarise the point you want to make while being ready to answer questions in more depth if asked.

Also, remember you are the advisor, not the decision-maker. Cutting into their time for discussion won't be appreciated.

Don't cover all the detail. It is in the paper.

## Structure your points carefully

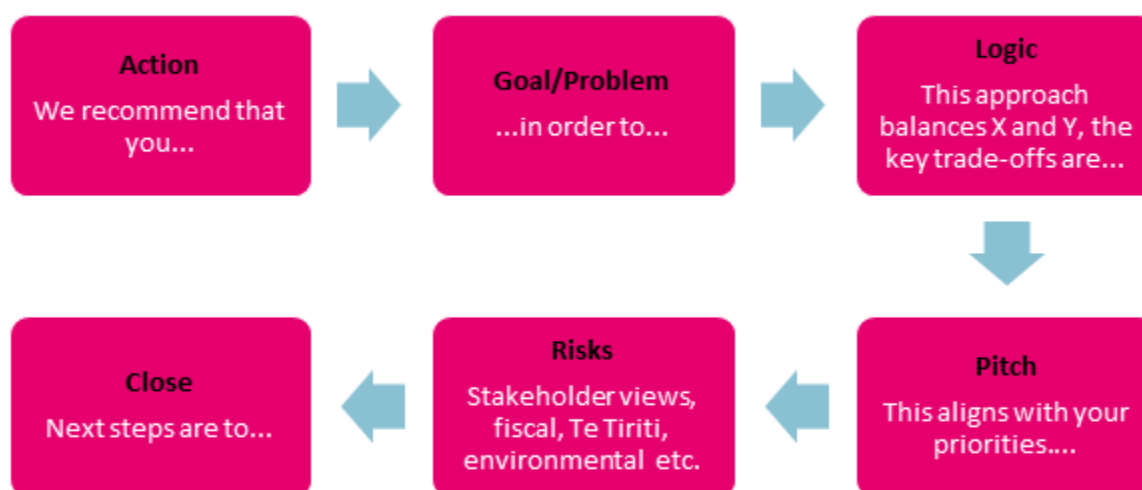
What you say should be a bit like your Executive Summary or Key points section. It should be very brief but include the core of the argument in the paper. The most crucial bits of evidence should also be displayed.

Typically, those setting the agenda for the meeting will already have an idea of the scale and importance of the problem – and will have allocated time accordingly. However, this might not be the case at a Cabinet Committee meeting.

Figure 1 is an example of how to shape what you have to say when presenting your paper.

<sup>1</sup> See our recent Masterclass on Lessons from speechwriting which suggested this as a key technique.

**Figure 1 A structure for presenting your advice**



Source: NZIER

### How you say it is important too

Think about your audience. How much do they know about the issue? Do they have different levels of knowledge or interest?

Language is important. Short sentences and plain language have a greater impact.

Take care with jargon. Best to stay away from it. But if you have to use it, make sure you only use terms that the audience understands.

### Link in with others

If others are involved, e.g. your manager, other team members or people from other agencies, make sure you are coordinated. Tell those others what you are going to say – and work out how they can support you, e.g. by bringing in-depth knowledge or expertise, a wider perspective, or explaining the views of other agencies.

And vice versa – it's helpful to know what they will say, too, so you can adjust your pitch.

If there is time a full-blown rehearsal – while often a bit awkward, can head off a lot of potential confusion.

### Stay calm

Common sense before any presentation. But easier said than done sometimes. Especially if it's a tricky issue, a tricky audience, or something you haven't done much of before.

There's lots of advice on how best to do this. Try the internet for some advice or experienced people around you. There are courses available. And do what works for you.

But if you've done the analysis and drafted the paper, you've got a head start – you are an expert and probably know more than those you are presenting to!

### You'll have to answer questions too

No doubt you'll be asked questions, too. These can be on a very wide range of topics – and be on the detail or the big picture. Again the watchword is brevity. Keep to the topic and deal with the question asked, not a wider issue.

There will always be a bit of thinking on your feet required.

But it helps to prepare. Think carefully about the sorts of questions those in the meeting might ask and prepare notes on possible answers.

It's often helpful to get colleagues to help with this. They can 'role play' the sorts of different (and sometimes off the wall) perspectives of others at the meeting – and think of things you might not.

### Have a good grip on the paper

You'll have to know the actual paper inside and out. Being able to refer to key elements of the paper to support your summary is powerful. As is referring to specific parts of the paper that address any issues raised.

### Use some data

Include some key data or statistics in your presentation if you can (and it's relevant). But not too much.

It helps to build the impression that you know what you are talking about! And it tends to stick in peoples' minds.

### Sometimes you can use props

On a complex issue, it can be handy to have a prop. We've seen a one-pager, e.g. a diagram or similar, used effectively.

It may even be possible to use a short slide pack, a slim A3 or even a couple of PowerPoint slides (if appropriate and doesn't involve too much mucking around with technology). But only if it fits with the style of the meeting and within the time slot you have!

### Practice

Doing these sorts of presentations doesn't come naturally for most of us. We've seen examples of even the most experienced people getting tripped up.

Practice helps. Try your presentation out on some colleagues (or your manager) ahead of time. This will help you refine and polish it.

You'll also gain experience by watching others present. And the reaction they get. Some people are very skilled at it.

There are often opportunities to watch the process in action – particularly at internal management groups and committees; or in interagency forums. Some Ministers are also happy to have more junior advisors observe meetings.

After the event, thinking about how you went and what you could do differently is good practice.

### In summary, be prepared

The Scout motto is the best advice. So:

- Prepare – make notes, think about the key messages and the issues that may be raised.
- Practice and refine your presentation – with an audience.
- Organise yourself and others – have any background information you might need on hand. And make sure it's easy to access. Be on time to check all the technical gear is working.

This paper was written at NZIER, June 2022.

For further information please contact anyone from our policy advice team:

Cathy Scott at [cathy.scott@nzier.org.nz](mailto:cathy.scott@nzier.org.nz)

Todd Krieble at [todd.krieble@nzier.org.nz](mailto:todd.krieble@nzier.org.nz),

John Yeabsley at [john.yeabsley@nzier.org.nz](mailto:john.yeabsley@nzier.org.nz)

NZIER | (04) 472 1880 | [econ@nzier.org.nz](mailto:econ@nzier.org.nz)

*While NZIER will use all reasonable endeavours in undertaking contract research and producing reports to ensure the information is as accurate as practicable, the Institute, its contributors, employees, and Board shall not be liable (whether in contract, tort (including negligence), equity or on any other basis) for any loss or damage sustained by any person relying on such work whatever the cause of such loss or damage.*