
MANAGING TASKS; MAKING PRESENTATIONS (p.1)

[A general 6-STAGE APPROACH to Task-solving]

Here, many of the techniques we have so far encountered will come together ...

ANALYSIS of TASK:	'Black – Red – Green'	+	'Shadow-WordS'
PLANNING:	'Core Statement'	+	'13 Ways'
HONING:	'Prompting'	+	'Breaking Stones'
MATERIALS:	'Designing OTs'	+	'The Four Ls'
PRESENTING:	'Body vs Brain'	+	Speaker ↔ Audience
	'Voice, Body and Breath'	+	'Holding the Thought'

+ add: 'Brainstorming'

Important: the notes below will help you with all kinds of task; but they focus on how to present an idea (eg an Essay Plan) to tutors, peers, etc. Note a crucial distinction here: namely, that a presentation *about* a task is itself a separate task, a new piece of planning, another 'argument' in its own right. So, the style and structure (even the content) of a presentation *about* an Essay Plan can easily differ from the style, structure and content of the Essay Plan itself. Be clear about this!

Stage I TASK ANALYSIS (*'Answering the Question'*)

Trying to design a presentation 'cold' (from absolute scratch) can be tough, unless you *really* do work best that way. Look closely at the statement defining your task. Use **Black-Red-Green** and *Shadow-WordS* to understand it fully. Plan, strategize. DON'T leave it all too late.

Stage II BRAINSTORMING (either for Essay Plan itself or how to present it)

Take a large sheet of paper. Explore concepts, themes, contradictions, key phrases... develop your thoughts and insights. Place them around a **Core Statement**, an encapsulating idea (with all its links and threads). Or try making linked lists. Mind-Maps (or 'Spider Diagrams') are good too – they help you to map out a conceptual space, explore associations.

Remember: no censoring or editing at this stage! Get everything down. It's liberating (especially at an early stage of the process) to get away from 'safe' linear reasoning.

After the Brainstorm/ Mind-Map, let the editor in you come back to the table. Fill in any gaps in the ideas. What do you need to check, chase up? Set up an 'internal debate' with yourself (or a friend): "*What is this task really after...? What themes are important... are there any I've missed? Which are the major (and the dissenting) voices in the literature...? How can I firm up this quirky idea...?*" etc. This process can generate astonishing impetus and clarity.

Stage III PLANNING: CONSTRUCTING AN ARGUMENT

An argument is the way you choose to structure your ideas and 'release' them to the listener/ reader; the **Core Statement** serves to encapsulate that argument.

A good argument demonstrates a clarity of purpose in its ideas and in their presented structure. The listener/ reader should feel you know exactly where you're going, and is being led there with you. So, in presenting your case for a particular view, plan how you'll build it up. Will your audience hear the Core Statement first, then see all the reasoning and evidence supporting or challenging it? Or will you work to a climax, hitting them with a clinching finale?

It bears repeating: these comments apply not only to a given assignment, but also to any presentation *about* it. That presentation (unless it's purely descriptive) will have its own 'argument' to make (eg a talk *about* an essay is not the same as reading the essay aloud to the audience). So, whichever of the **13 Ways** you used *within* your essay, you must now decide which 'Way' is best for presenting your talk *about* the essay. These needn't be the same!

[continued...]

PRESENTATIONS. Mix the visuals to maintain interest (eg overheads -> slides -> handout -> overhead...) It's often a good idea to finish by returning in some way to your opening point or statement (eg with a summary) or to leave the audience with a further question your work has raised.

TEXTS/ HANDOUTS/ ESSAYS. Headings and sub-headings (if you're allowed to use them) are easy on the eye, as are paragraph breaks (for each new idea or theme). A note on paragraph length: very short paragraphs create a stuttering, interrupted effect; overlong paragraphs become cluttered or lose focus.

Stage IV

HONING

A good argument needs **GLUE** and **STITCHING**.

GLUE connects words and ideas together within each sentence (its phrases and clauses), from sentence to sentence, and across paragraphs. **Glue** prevents your essay or presentation from becoming ambiguous or a mass of poorly-connected points.

Refer back to **Prompts** (= punctuation, connecting words, spatial and typographic signals, etc). These are a kind of glue. They help to carry the argument along and make it clear. They are little signposts, or arrows, showing where you've come from and where you intend to go.

Prompts can develop into quite complex clauses: eg '*Having thoroughly explored this latter avenue of thought, and given the vast quantity of literature already devoted to Rubin's hegemonic view, it is now important to ...*' More often, though, they are relatively simple:

<i>Despite...</i>	<i>Yet...</i>	<i>Because...</i>	<i>And...</i>
<i>Then...</i>	<i>However...</i>	<i>Consequently...</i>	<i>Since...</i>
<i>Similarly...</i>	<i>First... Second...</i>	<i>Although...</i>	<i>Thus...</i>
<i>Therefore...</i>	<i>Nevertheless...</i>	<i>Notwithstanding...</i>	<i>Clearly...</i>
<i>Moreover...</i>	<i>On the contrary...</i>	<i>Bearing this in mind...</i>	<i>So...</i>
<i>By contrast...</i>	<i>Furthermore...</i>	<i>In contradistinction to...</i>	<i>As a result...</i>
<i>Alternatively...</i>	<i>An instance of...</i>	<i>On the one/ other hand...</i>	<i>But...</i>

Get into a habit of *reading your work aloud* – this helps a lot in seeing where a dab of glue (or a prompt) is needed. Try '**Breaking Stones**' if anything seems woolly or difficult to follow.

STITCHING makes sure your entire argument holds together, that it's intelligible *as a whole*. You might need to unpick your presentation/ text to achieve this: i.e. re-write parts of it, re-order points, or move paragraphs, ideas and themes around. If this gets you nowhere, look again at the **13 Ways**. Have you a good structure for your ideas; have you used it consistently?

It's easier to stitch something together if you break it up into manageable pieces: each fresh idea, or major shift in emphasis, should have a new overhead or slide. Don't interrupt the flow too much; but avoid letting one thread of argument get too convoluted or lose its way.

Often, when you have a really convincing and consistent argument, the stitching doesn't show.

Stage V

CREATING YOUR MATERIALS

Refer back to '**Presentation Skills**' (*Designing OTs, The Four Ls*, etc). Think about the balance between visuals and texts. Avoid clutter. Presentations and Overhead Transparencies (OTs) are rarely effective at supplying mass detail: choose fewer points and cover them well. How can you lighten your material, let it breathe? A good presentation usually involves a clear, astute message – delivered with vocal / visual attractiveness and confidence.

Finish 'honing' *before* you make final handouts or OTs. Commit too soon, and you'll only have to do them again. Proof them. Try to simplify (whilst respecting good content). Rehearse 'speaking over' them. Do the audio-visuals clarify and support, or get in the way?

Stage VI

SPEAKING and PRESENTING

Refer back to '**Body vs Brain**' + '**Voice, Body and Breath**'. Have you addressed **Speaker ↔ Audience** interactions in positive ways? When you talk, will you be '**Holding the Thought**'? How can you minimise nerves, prepare your body for standing/speaking? Have you rehearsed?

‘BEFORE and AFTER’ :

some final thoughts about Managing Tasks

BEFORE = Checking

- If you’ve used a **Core Statement** make sure it’s clear, that your themes and points are organised around it in a meaningful way. Are the points gathered under their correct themes? Have you fully used, and extended, your mind-map or brainstorming session to build up the themes/points for your argument? Are there any important gaps in your argument or your understanding of the subject?
- Have you found a good structure for your idea, and an appropriate ‘**register**’ for it (i.e. the type of language you’re using; the tone/ style you deploy)? Does your work have (or need) a clear introduction, and a convincing ending? Do these address the question set, and do you make clear reference to the set task, throughout?
- For presentations, run through them well ahead of time. Rehearse. Actually *giving* the talk to yourself – or, better still, to a patient friend – is the best way to hear which bits aren’t working well (i.e. difficult to enunciate, or not very convincing, or overlong, confused, clogged, etc) and also helps you to see where you might do something with a little more inventiveness or flair. You can (and perhaps should?) improvise and adjust, to some degree, when you’re on stage; but don’t ask too much of yourself: it’s never comfortable to realise you’re running aground, during the talk itself. Also, it’s incredibly difficult to time the presentation, or to make sure all your bits of paper and audio-visuals are in the right place, just by flicking through your notes. So, stand up and *do it*. Rehearsing ‘in your head’ really isn’t the same at all.

... and AFTER = Learning

- Try to recognise your habits. Be aware of how you usually approach a task and how you work best. Did the same things go wrong? Or right? Make (and maintain) a checklist of things to watch out for in your own essays and presentations (use tutors’ previous comments, feedback, etc.). If appropriate, find out from friends and fellow students what they thought of your input (ask them to be honest, but tactful). Devise strategies for playing to your strengths and compensating for any blind-spots. Give that learning process some of your time. Enjoy it.
- There’s no ‘right’ way to write. Writers plan, organise and reflect in various ways and at different stages in the writing process. Find your own approach to task-solving, but do be prepared to adjust your techniques to the task in hand (and to learn new techniques if you don’t yet have them). Make plans; but leave room to change them, depending on how it goes.

Further reading:

P. Creme & M.R. Lea, ‘Writing at University: A Guide for Students’, Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997.