Book review

Presenting at Conferences, Seminars and Meetings
Kerry Shephard
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Review by Clare Seymour
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As the title states, this book is a self-help guide to improving and polishing public presentations, specifically, although not exclusively, within the academic arena. With 106 pages, it is a relatively short book written in a clear, concise and non-academic style.

In the introduction, Shepherd identifies his audience (professional people who need to use presentations as part of their professional role), his aim (developing a variety of presentational skills in a variety of settings) and his qualifications for writing such a book (not as an 'expert' presenter, but as a biology lecturer who has experienced very many presentations from very many perspectives).

The book is well organised and clearly presented. There is an informative index, and there are subheadings throughout, allowing the reader to identify particular sections of interest at a glance. Each chapter starts with a list of key concepts and finishes with a brief summary and list of references for further reading.

Chapter 1 uses case studies to identify the factors that contribute to a good presentation. Chapter 2 examines the theoretical base for presentations and considers the value of the spoken word in an interactive situation against other forms of communication. It concludes, based on a consideration of the literature, that the spoken word, delivered personally, has a fundamental impact on both learning and understanding.

Chapter 3 introduces the various presentation aids currently used and charts their development, before going on to offer practical advice about their use in different situations. Chapter 4 carries this theme forwards by outlining the skills needed for designing and writing presentations for different audiences.

Chapters 5 and 6 progress to the preparation aspects of the presentation. They consider both the individual's perspective and the particular venue where the presentation is to be made.

Chapter 7 could perhaps be considered a 'stand alone' chapter, in that it deals specifically, and in some depth, in the advantages and pitfalls of videoconferencing.

Chapter 8 moves on to the problematic areas one may encounter at any point in the delivery of the presentation, and offers suggestions as to how one may perhaps gracefully recover the situation, or alternatively pre-empt its occurrence in the first place.

Chapter 9 looks to the future by offering optimistic suggestions on how to keep improving in the delivery of presentations.

I would recommend this book to any aspiring presenter needing a confidence boost at the outset of preparing their presentation. It is an honest, positive, and sometimes humorous approach to a technique that is often taken for granted. It does exactly what it states on the cover – it is a highly practical and comprehensive guide in giving successful presentations which addresses issues across disciplines (the author outlines the different styles that are frequently required) and at a variety of levels (from undergraduate student to professional).

As a mid-career professional mid-way through a doctoral programme, I have been required to give many presentations on many different topics over the years. This book has helped to affirm my good practice and has offered ways of critiquing and improving my presentations further. I would therefore recommend this book as a welcome addition to any aspiring presenter's bookshelves (and even some seasoned, but disorganised, old-timers!). It is not a book to read cover-to-cover, but rather as a resource to use as and when necessary. Personally, I have found the end of chapter references and the final bibliography to be valuable resources in helping to broaden my presenting technique further.