

## Five Basic Presentation Formats

Excerpted and adapted from *Architect's Essentials of Presentation Skills*, by David Greusel, AIA  
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### SUMMARY

One can use five basic presentation formats to communicate ideas: lecture, seminar, workshop, conference, and retreat. An effective presenter prepares excellent content and chooses the format that best meets the objective of the gathering.

### COMMUNICATING IDEAS

The presentation of ideas is an integral part of an architect's education and training. Through the studio critique and design jury, architecture students acquire—consciously or unconsciously—considerable experience with a wide variety of delivery methods.

Presentations comprise two fundamental elements: the content and the method of delivery. You must attend to both if you wish to deliver truly effective presentations. Excellent content, poorly or inappropriately delivered, is no more effective than poor content delivered with consummate skill.

Nearly all presentations can be classified by format in one of five general categories. Consciously applying the one that is most appropriate to a particular situation may increase your effectiveness as a presenter and increase the likelihood of achieving the objective of the gathering.

The importance of interaction in any gathering cannot be overstated. To the extent that you can choose the format, always choose the one that will allow for the greatest interaction between you and your audience, as it will foster empathy between you and your listeners. Interaction tends to increase as the formality of the presentation format declines.

### LECTURE

The most common format for communication from one (or few) to many, a lecture consists of one or more speakers addressing a passive audience. This places a tremendous burden on the speaker(s) to be dynamic and engaging, and regrettably few are equal to the task. It is best avoided unless no other option is available.

### Interactive Lecture

The key difference between a lecture and an interactive lecture is that the speaker welcomes and encourages group interaction. When opportunities are provided for questions and clarification, the audience is more likely to become and remain engaged. The speaker needs to be willing to interrupt the flow of ideas just long enough to give listeners an opportunity to ask questions. This can be a challenge for speakers who are determined to move through an ambitious agenda. Skilled speakers, however, can deliver effective interactive presentations regardless of the audience size.

### SEMINAR

Most effective when the number of participants is 20 or fewer, a seminar is led by someone who is presumed to have a greater knowledge of the subject than the other participants, who are nonetheless expected to contribute to an increased understanding of the topic. The seminar format can effectively foster a climate of design collaboration, particularly in situations in which most of the participants are not design professionals.

### WORKSHOP

A workshop is much like a seminar, except that a facilitator who does not necessarily have specialized or greater knowledge of the topic may take the place of the seminar discussion leader. The facilitator's role is to help the group discuss a topic in an orderly fashion. Although architects usually think they have specialized knowledge that would preclude assuming the role of facilitator, a workshop can be an excellent choice when the topic lies just outside your realm of expertise or you wish to gather more information about a problem or situation. It is also a powerful way to communicate to others—and to remind yourself—that architects seldom know more about their clients' business than the clients do. Assuming the humble role of facilitator can help you establish a strong sense of collaboration among all present.

## CONFERENCE

Not to be confused with a presentation delivered at a large “conference,” the conference format is a gathering of peers with different perspectives who discuss a problem or topic. It is a casual setting with no leader or presenter and little or no actual “presenting.” A conference has a desired outcome and the collective force of the gathered experts achieve that objective.

## RETREAT

A retreat is completely informal, often having no direction or targeted outcome. It is intended to foster an environment in which ideas can flow free of the pressures of time and the formality of normal business. Ideas often develop on the spot through brainstorming and discussion. If one is well prepared, a retreat can be a great setting for “presenting,” provided the presentation does not violate the spirit of informality.

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

David Greusel, AIA, is a principal of HOK Sport + Venue + Event, one of the leading experts in the field.

## RESOURCES

### More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 03.01.04 The Five Es of Effective Delivery
- 03.01.06 Zen and the Art of Presenting in Public

### For More Information on This Topic

*Architect's Essentials of Presentation Skills* by David Greusel, AIA, can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by sending e-mail to [bookstore@aia.org](mailto:bookstore@aia.org).



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## Keywords

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