

# Assignment – Oral Communication Skills Semester 1, 2013

This guide contains:

- All information about how to do, and the requirements of, this assignment.
- Information about the assessment criteria.

Please carefully read all of this guide ***before*** beginning your assignment. It contains important information of the assessment criteria and the requirements of the assessment task. Scrupulous attention to the information in this guide will assist you to maximise your result in the assignment.

***Due Date:*** 2.30 p.m., Monday 6 May, 2013. Further details are provided within this guide.

***Contribution to Overall Grade:*** This assignment contributes 20% to your overall result in this course. Please note that your team will be marked collectively on the technical content of the assignment but each person will be marked individually on their communication skills. Full details are provided within this guide.

**PLEASE NOTE:** This assignment is based on a real existing group of companies and their administrator. In preparing for this assignment you should only access publicly available information – DO NOT CONTACT any of the parties involved as they have no association with the assignment and have not given permission to be contacted. Situations in which there are financial difficulties are particularly sensitive for those involved and any contact will be seen as inappropriate and is likely to receive a negative response.

### Overview of the Assignment:

You are required to form teams of three people to conduct an oral communication role play which is to be recorded and submitted for assessment. The assignment is based on a real group of companies (the Hastie Group) which has found itself in financial trouble and the technical content is relevant to the business combinations section of the course (weeks two and three of lectures). The role play is set within the context of a television interview in which one member of the team plays the part of the interviewer, one plays the part of an accountant acting as an administrator of the group, and the third team member is a representative of the Hastie Group of companies.

### Objectives of the Assignment:

The objectives of this assignment are to assist you to develop and practice effective discussion skills; understand and practice communication in a workplace setting; and so be prepared for the workplace.

Accounting, like any other profession, is a 'people' based activity – e.g., accountants interact with clients and fellow employees. Accountants have to be able to convince clients as to the appropriateness of their advice on financial matters and work harmoniously and productively with colleagues. As you become more senior in your future employment, there may also be various situations in which you are asked to comment publicly on various issues – e.g., television reports frequently show interviews with liquidators of companies which have encountered financial difficulties. In most recent Graduate Outlook<sup>1</sup> survey of employers, the following information was provided about employers' views about the importance of good communication skills (pp. 15 and 16 – in table 6 A/F refers to accounting and finance employers).

**Table 5: Most important selection criteria when recruiting graduates, 2009-11 (Rank)**

Selection Criteria	2009	2010	2011
Interpersonal and communication skills (written and oral)	1	1	1
Passion/Knowledge of industry/Drive/Commitment/Attitude	2	2	2
Critical reasoning and analytical skills/Problem solving/Lateral thinking/Technical skills	3	3	3
Calibre of academic results	4	4	4
Work experience	6	6	5
Cultural alignment / Values fit	7	5	6
Teamwork skills	5	7	7
Emotional intelligence (incl. self-awareness, strength of character, confidence, motivation)	8	8	8
Leadership skills	9	9	9
Activities (incl. intra and extra curricular)	10	10	10

<sup>1</sup> Graduate Careers Australia, 2011, *Graduate Outlook 2011*, Melbourne.

**Table 6: Least desirable characteristics when recruiting graduates, by industry<sup>1</sup>, 2011 (Rank)**

Least Desirable Characteristics	G/D/H	C/M/E	A/F	L/PS	M	C/T/U	All
Poor attitude / Lack of work ethic / Approach to work	2	1	3	1	5	1	1
Lack of interpersonal and communication skills (etc.)	1	4	1	2	1	1	2
Lack of drive, motivation, enthusiasm and initiative	4	2	2	4	3	3	3
Arrogance/Selfishness/Aggression/Dominating	3	3	4	3	2	4	4
Inflexibility/Inability to accept direction (etc.)	6	5	6	5	7	8	5
Poor teamwork skills	5	7	7	8	4	5	6
Poor or inappropriate academic qualifications or results	7	6	5	7	7	5	7
Lack of commitment / High absenteeism / Lack of loyalty	8	8	8	5	6	5	8
Lack of emotional intelligence, self-awareness (etc.)	9	9	9	9	9	9	9

From the above it is evident that employers rate communication skills as their number one priority when employing graduates.

Recently, all higher education providers of accounting degrees in Australia are required to provide evidence that their accounting graduates have achieved common National minimum learning threshold outcomes (LTOs) at the time of graduation. These LTOs were developed collaboratively with input from the professional accounting bodies, various business practitioners and accounting academics. Five LTOs were developed for the accounting discipline<sup>2</sup> of which the communication standard is relevant for this assignment. That standard requires that an accounting graduate of a bachelors degree must demonstrate:

“Justify and communicate accounting advice and ideas in straightforward collaborative contexts involving both accountants and non-accountants.”

Please keep this LTO in mind when preparing your assignment as this is the basic benchmark against which your assignment submission will be assessed.

The main objective of this assignment, therefore, is to assist you to develop and practice a level of professional presentation that meets this LTO.

### **Background to the Scenario:**

The 2011 Annual Report (p. 48) of the Hastie Group of companies describes the principal activities of the group as follows:

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the accounting LTOs please see: Hancock, P., & Freeman, M. A. (2010). Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Statement for Accounting *Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project*: Australian Learning & Teaching Council.

“Hastie Group Limited is a leading international designer, installer and maintainer of technical services - mechanical, electrical, commercial plumbing, fire and refrigeration - to the building and infrastructure sectors. The Group has well established operations in Australia and New Zealand, the UK and the Middle East, with around 8,000 employees based at multiple locations. The group operates under brands which are well recognised in their markets, and customers include many of the largest construction companies, shopping centre groups, industrial corporations and facility managers. Hastie Group Limited is a member of the S&P/ASX300 Index.”

As a result of financial difficulties, on May 28, 2012, the directors of the Hastie Group appointed the firm PPB Advisory as administrators of the group as a preliminary step towards the eventual liquidation of some, or all, of the member companies of the group. As part of the administration process, the administrators prepared a report in January 2013 outlining, *inter alia*, the state of affairs of the group. Copies of the 2005 to 2011 annual report of the Hastie Group have been placed under the assignment tab on the [course website]. You will also find under that tab, a link to the administrator’s January 2013 report. The financial difficulties of the Hastie Group have been the subject of media interest and you can find additional information by researching the company in the financial press.

### **The Assessment Task:**

You are to form a team of three students from this course to conduct a television interview which is to be recorded and submitted for assessment. Each member of the team is to assume one particular role – one of you will be the television interviewer, one an accountant representing the administrator, and the third team member is to take the role of representing the Hastie Group. The television interview can be set in a ‘studio’ setting or ‘out in the field’. The total length of the interview **cannot exceed ten minutes** and each member of the role play must contribute approximately equal air time. You are free to construct the ‘script’ as you wish but as a minimum the following issues must be covered by the interview:

- an outline of the financial difficulties encountered by the Hastie Group;
- the extent, if at all, to which the business model pursued by the Hastie Group contributed to its financial difficulties; and
- in hindsight, the extent to which a careful analysis of past years’ financial statements would have provided a warning about the financial difficulties of the group.

As a context for your interview, assume that the interview is being recorded for a (hypothetical) ABC program called *Business Insights* which is televised on Sunday mornings at 10.30 a.m. Assume that market research suggests that the programme’s audience has the following demographic characteristics:

- 60% male, 40% female;
- average age is 49 with a range between 28 – 70;
- about 30% of the audience work in professions (e.g., doctors, lawyers, etc.) but only a relatively small number of these people are professional accountants;
- another 35% of the audience are small business owners; and
- nearly all the audience have investments on the Australian Securities Exchange (in addition to those managed by their superannuation funds).

## Your Team:

It is your responsibility to form your team of three course members. *Teams of any other size are not permitted and friends, relatives, etc. are unable to participate in the interview* (although you may wish to have someone other than a team member hold the camera). Teams need to be registered by the end of week 3 at the latest. Any team that is not registered using the process described in the next section will be unable to submit their assignment. You can use the discussion board on [the course website] to help find team members if you are having any difficulties. We reserve the right to change or create teams in any situation where there are issues relating to team membership. Make sure that you organise a plan of meetings and allocate actions so that you make quick and effective progress.

## Instructions for Registering Your Team:

For the team assignment, you must form a team of three people by the end of week 3. Once you set up your assignment team, you need to nominate a team leader to register your team. For registration, the team leader needs to download the “sign-up” spreadsheet from the Assignment folder on [the course website]. A team registration table is provided on the “sign-up” spreadsheet where the team leader needs to report the student ID, last name and first name of each team member. An example of how you fill in the team registration table is provided as below.

Member	Student ID	Last Name	First Name
1	a1234567	Smith	Mark
2	a1234568	Kim	Su
3	a1234569	Chen	Emon

Once the registration table is completed, the team leader must save the file and email it (as an attachment) to [removed to maintain anonymity]. The email subject line **must** be “**CA Assignment Team Registration**”. **Only the team leader needs to send an email to** [removed to maintain anonymity] **for registration of the team, NOT each member of the team.** The team leader must only send an email **ONCE**.

It is very important that you strictly follow the instructions as provided and send the team registration form to [removed to maintain anonymity] by **5:00pm Friday, 22nd of March** otherwise, you will not be able submit your assignment.

## Recording Logistics:

You are required to record your interview and submit it by the due date for assessment (see “Submission” below). It is your responsibility to appropriately record the interview. You may use your own equipment or alternatively some limited recording facilities are available in [the Student Centre] on campus. Information about how to book these facilities is provided towards the end of this handout [this has been removed to ensure anonymity]. Please note that the [accounting] staff are unable to assist you with bookings and facilities at the [Centre] – the [Student Centre] staff are very happy to provide whatever assistance they can. Do **NOT** leave the recording of your interview until near the submission date as you risk being unable to book recording facilities if you need them. There will be approximately 70 teams in this course alone wanting to make a recording and the resources may be needed by other members of the university community as well. You will **NOT** be given an extension due to an inability to access recording equipment.

**Submission:**

Your recorded interviews must be submitted to the appropriate assignment box on the ground floor of [removed to preserve anonymity] by 2.30 p.m. on Monday 6 May, 2013. Recordings can be submitted on either a flash drive (preferred method) or on a CD but must be in a format playable by Windows Media Player. You must ensure that your recording is playable before submitting it. Your flash drive/CD must be submitted in a sealed envelope and be accompanied by a hard copy of the assignment cover sheet which must be signed by each member of the team. The cover sheet must also be used to identify which team member played which role in the interview (assignments which do not indicate this will not be marked). For quality assurance purposes the [accounting department] would like to be able to use some of these recordings as exemplars of good practices – if you are prepared to allow your work to be viewed by others for these purposes, please also fill out and sign the authority form and include a hard copy of that in the envelope. Copies of the cover sheet and authority form are provided at the end of this handout.

**Assessment Criteria:**

This assignment is marked out of 100 and is worth 20% of your final grade.

Given the objective of the assignment, 70% of the 100 marks that could be awarded will be associated with the oral communication skills demonstrated in your interview and the remaining 30% will be associated with the technical content of your interview. A draft feedback rubric is provided towards the end of this handout to provide guidance to you about the criteria on which the presentation will be assessed.

NOTE: although you are working in a team, each member of the team will be assessed individually with regard to communication skills. Technical knowledge will be assessed across the whole team.

**Other Important Information About the Conduct of the Interview and Assessment:**

The following points are important for you to keep in mind for this assignment. Failure to give due attention to these items will result in lost marks:

- Although we hope that you find this role play assignment interesting and fun, please remember the objective which is to demonstrate communication skills at a professional level. Please make sure that you adopt appropriate dress and behaviour standards and remember to use professional language. Ensure, too, that your language is 'pitched' at the right level for the program's audience. For example, if you have to make reference to accounting standards, you should consider how you are going to do this in a way that the audience will understand.
- Avoid 'reading a script' or giving the impression that you are reading a script. Not only does 'reading' make for very 'wooden' and boring viewing, it also suggests to the audience that you do not understand the material you are referring to.
- As each team member will be individually assessed on their own communication skills and each is expected to have approximately the same level of participation in the interview, you must ensure that each team member has sufficient opportunity to demonstrate their communication skills. For example, whoever has the role of interviewer should be very careful that they don't simply sit there reading out a few pre-set questions. Rather all team members should be engaged in a dialogue/debate with each other – so, for instance, the

interviewer will need to demonstrate that they are listening, and responding, to the remarks of the interviewee. This could include asking probing or argumentative styles of questions.

- Remember that communication is not simply the delivery of information – it includes assisting the audience to understand the situation and its implications and/or persuading the audience to a particular point of view.

**Additional Support:**

The [Student] Learning Centre (SLC) will provide an online document on 'Tips for Effective Teamwork' which you will be able to access via the Assignments tab on the [course website]. The SLC material will focus on how to establish cohesiveness within the team, fair and equal distribution of workload, monitoring and evaluation of the team progress and effective discussion skills.

Presented below is a draft feedback rubric to assist you in preparing your interview. Please note that this rubric is presented as a guide and we reserve the right to make minor changes to it when marking assignments.

## Oral Communication Rubric

	(High)			(Low)
<b>Assessed Separately for Each Individual (70%)</b>				
<b>Eye Contact</b>	The speaker is looking at the viewing audience almost all of the time. The speaker makes direct eye contact with most of the members of the viewing audience or other members of the interview at some point in the talk.	The speaker is looking up for most of the talk. The direct eye contact with members of the viewing audience or other members of the interview is sporadic.	The speaker looks at the audience part of the time. When looking up, there is little direct eye contact with members of the audience or other members of the interview.	Most of the time, the speaker is not looking at the viewing audience or the other members of the interview.
<b>Voice</b>	Every spoken word can be heard and understood clearly with no difficulty by each person in the audience. The speaker speaks in standard professional English, using correct vocabulary for the subject area and language appropriate for the audience.	A very brief portion of the talk may be unclear or inaudible to some members of the audience, OR the audience has to make an effort to hear and understand. The speaker speaks in standard professional English using correct vocabulary for the subject area and for the audience.	Several parts of the talk are unclear or inaudible to some members of the audience, OR one portion is unclear or inaudible to most of the audience. The speaker occasionally speaks in nonstandard or unprofessional English and uses some terms incorrectly.	Several portions of the talk are unclear or inaudible to most of the audience. The speaker frequently speaks in nonstandard and unprofessional English and uses terms incorrectly. The talk is not pitched at the level appropriate for the type of audience.
<b>Preparation</b>	Preparation is highly evident. The speaker makes smooth transitions between parts of the talk.	Preparation is evident. Most transitions between parts of the talk are smooth.	Preparation may or may not be evident. Unnecessary delays or pauses exist in the interview.	Preparation is not evident. The talk seems to be unorganized. Unnecessary pauses or awkward delays occur.
<b>Pace</b>	Talk moves at natural rate and rhythm. No inappropriate pauses or silences occur.	Talk is slightly hurried or slow. Occasional gaps of "dead air" occur that do not detract very much from the meaning.	Talk is somewhat hurried or sluggish throughout, OR several noticeable pauses occur in an otherwise well-paced talk.	Talk is noticeably rushed or protracted, OR several lengthy pauses occur during the talk.



<b>Expression</b>	The speaker uses a variety of volume modulations (louder/softer), voice inflections (tone of voice), gestures, and facial expressions to convey enthusiasm or energy. All expressive techniques are appropriate to the content of the talk. Techniques are not overused or overdone.	The speaker takes advantage of opportunities to be expressive. Some of the techniques are overused or overdone.	Some expressive techniques are employed at times by the speaker, but for the most part, the tone is lifeless or inappropriate.	Talk is flat. Voice is consistently a monotone. Little or no energy is used to convey feelings.
<b>Audience Engagement</b>	The speaker engages the viewing audience in a natural manner through eye contact, questioning skills, and by delivering an animated presentation throughout the interview.	The speaker naturally engages the viewing audience at times during the interview through eye contact and questioning skills.	The speaker makes some attempts to engage the viewing audience in the presentation. Attempts are forced and do not seem natural.	The speaker does not engage the viewing audience.
<b>Practiced</b>	The presentation is well practiced with occasional looks to cue cards or notes but without losing contact with the audience.	The presentation is practiced for the most part with some extended looks at cue cards or notes.	The presentation does not appear to have been practiced, and lines are mostly read from cue cards or notes.	The presentation is unprepared with no attempt to deliver a quality presentation.
<b>Assessed at the Team Level (30%)</b>				
<b>Knowledge of Subject</b>	The team demonstrates thorough knowledge of relevant subject matter and is able to appropriately integrate the facts with relevant accounting concepts/practices.	The team demonstrates adequate relevant knowledge and concepts but could demonstrate greater understanding or command of key issues.	The team demonstrates little or no relevant knowledge. There is no or very limited use of concepts covered in the course to inform the interview.	