

GUIDELINES FOR PUBLIC SPEAKING

From asking and answering questions in class to delivering a formal speech, public speaking is an important part of your academic career. The following guidelines are useful to consider when crafting a public presentation and planning your delivery.

It can be tempting to treat a public speaking assignment as an occasion to simply read a paper. But there are major differences between written communication and speeches. As readers, we control the pace and speed that we take in information. We can also go back and reread any information that we miss. As listeners, we can not control the pace and speed of an oral presentation, and we can not ask a speaker to go back and repeat any information that we miss. As listeners, we also have limited attention spans. Our minds tend to wander after ten minutes or so.

When preparing and delivering your presentations, be aware of your audience's needs. Effective speeches are tightly organized and have a clear focus.

CONTENT

In structuring your presentation, keep in mind the following principles that will result in better reception, understanding, and retention of information for your audience members.

1. Be sure that your presentation is focused and well-organized. Limit your discussion to three to four main points.
2. Begin with a clear introduction that asserts your thesis or topic.
3. Provide a brief outline of your presentation so that your audience knows what to expect and can follow along more easily.
4. As you develop your discussion, clearly introduce each point that will support your topic.
5. Use skillful repetition and effective transitions to emphasize your points and to keep your audience's attention.
6. End with a solid conclusion that effectively wraps up your presentation.

STRUCTURING INFORMATIVE SPEECHES

(taken in part from The Challenge of Effective Speaking by Rudolph Verderber)

The purpose of any informative speech or presentation is to facilitate the learning process. We can do this in three ways:

Help listeners to become receptive to new information. Listeners are quick to judge whether or not they will listen to new information. Our goal as speakers is to show listeners that being receptive is vital to learning.

Help listeners to understand the material. Speakers can help listeners relate information to their own experience. Speakers can also help listeners apply that information in their work and personal lives.

Help listeners retain the material they have received. As soon as we take in information, we begin to lose it—unless we can learn to hold on to it.

Several basic principles result in the reception, understanding, and retention of new information.

1. Information is more readily received when it is **relevant to audience experience**.
Make your presentation vital to your audience.
2. Information is more readily received when it is **new**.
Try to introduce novelty in your explanations.
3. Information is more readily received when it is **startling**.
Use some attention-getting techniques during your presentation.
4. Information is more readily received and retained when it is **presented humorously**.
Moderate use of humor related to your topic can be very effective.
5. Information is more likely to be understood and retained if it is **associated**.
Try to associate new or complicated material with familiar concepts.
6. Information is more likely to be understood and retained when it is **related visually**.
Use appropriate visual aids to enhance your presentation.
7. Information is more likely to be understood and retained when it is **repeated**.
Implement artful restatement of key words and concepts.
8. Information is more likely to be understood and retained when it is **well-organized**.
Begin with a clear outline and let your audience in on your organization.

DELIVERY

A large part of delivering an effective presentation is creating an authoritative and confident image. To accomplish this, try the following.

1. Dress somewhat more formally than the members of your audience.
2. Before you begin your presentation, pause a few seconds to organize yourself and establish your presence as the speaker. Look at the audience. Don't rush to begin.
3. Stand erect behind the lectern. Be careful not to lean on it or sway behind it. To stabilize your body, stand with your feet under your shoulders and distribute your weight evenly on both feet.
4. If you don't know what to do with your hands during the presentation, rest them lightly on the lectern. It's a neutral and effective position.
5. Make eye contact with individual members of your audience. Avoid just reading your paper or appearing to just read it.
6. Use your voice to enliven your presentation and maintain your audience's interest. For example, practice varying your pace and inflection and/or incorporating strategic pauses.
7. Use hand gestures when appropriate.

8. When you conclude the prepared part of your presentation, invite the audience to ask questions.
9. When you finish your presentation, walk back to your seat with confidence and pride: No slinking or slouching, sighing or eye-rolling!

SPEECH FRIGHT

Be aware that public speaking is an anxiety-provoking event for almost everyone. Many surveys show that it is people's number one fear, that more people would rather jump out of a plane (with a parachute!) than give a speech.

And there are physical consequences to this fear. When we are frightened or anxious, our body produces the "fight or flight" response. In effect, as our anxiety grows about speaking, we prepare to meet a "threat." In response to that threat, we produce adrenaline and it, along with a number of other hormones, rushes into the bloodstream, pumping up the body and putting the brain on sensory alert. We become extremely sensitive to sounds and movements. At the same time, our muscles tense, our heart rate and breathing quicken, our pores open, and our digestive system shuts down. We are ready for extreme action, but the situation requires us to focus and speak.

However, as speakers, we can use our heightened physical energy and perceptions to enliven our presentations. Before the presentation, anxiety can motivate us to prepare. During the speech, we can harness nervous energy to help with voice projection, movement and gesturing. Turned outward, heightened consciousness can become heightened responsiveness to an audience instead of painful self-consciousness.

Fortunately, there are remedies for overcoming speech fright.

1. Rehearse thoroughly.
2. Know your subject as completely as possible.
3. Use visual aids.
4. Concentrate on your message.
5. Speak to the individuals rather than to a group.
6. Avoid formality: try a more personal approach.
7. Use physical techniques: deep breathing, smiling, stretching, exercising, yawning.
8. SPEAK AS OFTEN AS YOU CAN.

REHEARSAL

The key to any successful presentation is becoming comfortable and familiar with it by practicing it. Below are some tips for rehearsing.

1. Rehearse frequently and in a variety of ways. For example, rehearse out loud in front of friends and silently in your head. Ask for feedback. Tape recording yourself can also be helpful. If you get stuck when rehearsing, continue on! Don't return to the beginning of your presentation and start again.
2. Time yourself so that you have a clear sense of how long your presentation will take.

3. Conduct a complete dress rehearsal. If possible, try to do it in the room where you'll be giving the presentation or in a similar space. In this dress rehearsal, be sure to incorporate any visual aids and/or electronic equipment that you will be using in the final presentation.

QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Answering questions from the audience is often a part of your presentation. Keep the following guidelines in mind when doing so.

1. Listen carefully to the question.
2. Repeat each question to the entire audience and direct your answer to the audience, not to the individual questioner. Move your eyes back to the audience as soon as the questioner is finished.
3. Compliment the questioners selectively and be specific.
4. Rephrase questions that are unclear and rambling.
5. If you don't understand the question, admit it, saying, "I'm sorry. I don't understand the question." Do not say, "Your question isn't clear."
6. Keep your major premise foremost in your mind while answering questions so that you are not trapped into a tangential area, winning individual points at the risk of clouding your original objective.
7. Try to keep your answers short.
8. If you don't know the answer, admit it. Do not try to bluff the answer. Offer to get back to the questioner with the information, when appropriate.
9. Use evidence rather than your own opinion in your response to questions to help the audience to accept your position.

When answering questions, don't do the following:

1. Ask for approval of your restatement of the question; for example, "Is that the question you asked?" If the questioner is not satisfied, he or she can try to question you informally after your talk.
2. Ask for approval of your answer. Chances are the questioner may not be completely satisfied, and you will lose control of the group by ending up in a conversation.
3. End your answer in visual contact with the questioner. He or she may take this as an invitation to ask another question.
4. "Lose your cool." If a member of the audience is irritating you, accept his or her questions, and when repeating questions and answers to the group, avoid eye contact with this person. Remember, the more visual contact you have with this person, the more irritated *you* will become.

VISUAL AIDS

When deciding whether to use visual aids, consider if and how they will enhance your presentation. If they won't, don't use them. Visual aids need to be true visuals—avoid “visual verbals”; your audience does not need both to hear and read your speech.

Using PowerPoint

1. Don't overwhelm your audience with slides; be judicious in creating your presentation.
2. Make sure the print is large, the picture clear; use colors.
3. Check all equipment before use.
4. For a detailed explanation of creating PowerPoint presentations, visit http://www.smith.edu/its/tara/ms_ppoint/ppoint_intro.html

Using a Flip Chart or a Chalkboard

1. Print clearly in large letters (2" letters for 30'—rule of thumb) and vary the colors used.
2. Don't write in full sentences, only highlights.
3. Limit the number of lines to 6; the number of words per line to 6.
4. Don't use unfamiliar abbreviations.
5. Tag flip chart pages for easy reference.
6. Don't speak with your back to the group; maintain eye contact.
7. Don't block the chart or board; stand to the side, even when writing.
8. Prepare pieces of tape for hanging pages.
9. When not using the page, cover it or move it to the side.
10. Build the transition to the exhibit before displaying the exhibit.

Using a Model

1. Be sure it is large enough for everyone to see.
2. Take your time showing it; make sure everyone gets to see it.
3. Focus attention on some aspect of the model.
4. Prepare for mechanical failure—have a back-up plan.

Using Films

1. Make sure the message meets the objectives of your presentation.
2. Consider stopping and starting the film to discuss crucial points.
3. Introduce film as it relates to the talk.

Using Handouts

1. Use handouts only if you want the audience to walk away with something in their hands.
2. If possible, distribute handouts at beginning or end of presentation, not during.
3. If you distribute a handout before the presentation, design it so you can read it together and so that each page can be used for a particular point.
4. When depicting statistics, use a graph rather than a page full of numbers.
5. Announce your intention to distribute handouts to reduce note-taking.
6. Don't let attention shift to the handout. Instruct group when to put it aside.

Additional Sources

Materials written by Geraldine Henze ('71)

101 Secrets of Highly Effective Speakers by Caryl Rae Krannich