

The Craft of Effective Oral Presentations

Strategic Design

A. Questions to Consider in Early Preparation

Purpose: Why am I giving this presentation? What is my main message (~conclusion)? What do I want the audience to take away? What do I need to be successful?

Audience: Who is my audience and what are they expecting? What do they want and need to know?

Logistics: How much time do I have? How many audience members do I expect? Am I part of a team? Where will the presentation take place?

B. Contents and Organization

For most academic and professional audiences in the Anglo-American world, your approach will be appropriate if you

- Make your main message blazingly clear, and refer to it throughout your talk.
- Choose your content and approach based on what the audience needs/wants and NOT what you know.
- Be selective in your content. Don't tell the audience everything that you know about a subject. Focus on what the audience wants and needs to know.
- Pay particular attention to your introduction and conclusion; your audience is most attentive in these sections. Your introduction should clearly indicate your key message as well as the scope of your presentation. Conclude your presentation by summarizing your key points or putting your message into some greater context. Never conclude with "That's all!"
- Keep your main points clear and unencumbered by distracting detail.

C. Effective Design of Visual Aids

The purpose of visual aids is to help the audience understand the content of your presentation and remember your key message. The aids should support your message. Your goal should not be (exclusively) to entertain the audience and display your prowess with presentation software. As techies say "Provide a high signal to noise ratio." General conventions for success follow:

1. Use clear and consistent text.

- Keep it simple, readable and immediately comprehensible.
- Use no more than two font types (e.g., Arial and Garamond) per slide.
- Try to use a minimum of 24-point font size (sometimes hard in graphics).

- Design aids from the point of view of the audience member farthest away from the speaker.
- Check for accurate grammar and spelling.

2. Use color purposefully to emphasize content and minimize distraction.

- Avoid random use of color.
- Avoid ornate backgrounds.
- Keep in mind that contrast improves readability.
- Keep in mind that room lighting affects contrast.

3. Use graphics purposefully to emphasize content.

- Avoid clip-art clutter.
- Use recurring graphics (e.g., logo or menu bar) for impact.
- Manage data: avoid tables; refer audience to handout or publication for full data set.

4. Fight against the temptation to use all the tools that presentation technology allows.

- Minimize the complications, dead time and embarrassment that loose cables, slow downloading, poor audio/video quality, faulty equipment, etc. can cause.
- Minimize special effects, e.g., sound.
- Always have backup transparencies.
- Keep transparencies and slides in good order for access during questions.

Strategic Delivery

A. Connecting with your audience

- Respect your audience. Look at them and speak to them. Be conversational. Move around and gesture. If you simply stand in one place and read your slides or notes, the connection between you and your audience is broken.

- Be enthusiastic about your subject. If you don't seem interested, your audience will not be interested.

- Speak with confidence and make no excuses. Never undercut your message, yourself, or your reason for being there. Don't apologize. Make your best effort, and the audience will appreciate it.

- Be sensitivity to timing. Try to prepare for a talk that is 25% shorter than the time allowed. Rehearse your presentation well beforehand; leave time for questions. However, don't over rehearse. If you practice the talk too many times, it may sound as if you've memorized it.

B. Using your visuals effectively

- Handle the aid as little as possible. Avoid using a transparency, remote control or mouse as a crutch. Display the aid only when you are ready to discuss it. Remove the aid when you are through discussing it. Turn off projection equipment when not in use.
- Compensate for the audience's divided attention. Increase volume and clear articulation of speech. Continue to talk while handling aids. Avoid excessive slides (more than 1/minute).
- Position yourself carefully. Always face and talk to the audience, not the visual aids.
- Stand or move at the sides of the screen, not between the audience and the aid/screen.
- Emphasize details by pointing at the screen, preferably with your hand. Pointers, especially laser pointers, tend to be overused and distracting.

C. Ten tips for nervous speakers

Most speakers experience a low level of anxiety before a presentation. You can make this feeling work *for* you instead of *against* you by doing the following:

1. Know exactly what your listeners expect from you. Ask the person who requested the presentation or a prospective audience member what they want.
2. If possible, familiarize yourself in advance with the room set-up.
3. Rehearse your presentation at least twice. The first time, focus on familiarizing yourself with your material and checking your timing. The second time, record yourself for playback, or present to a friend/colleague, and time the presentation. Ask for feedback.
4. Eat before you present. Speaking with an empty stomach exacerbates anxiety.
5. Avoid excessive caffeine, which also exacerbates anxiety.
6. Before the presentation chat with audience members.
7. During the presentation, speak directly to individuals for several seconds; choose individuals throughout the room.
8. Use your gestures to enhance communication, not distract from it. Be aware of nervous mannerisms (e.g., playing with a pen, stroking your beard, smoothing back your hair) and practice suppressing them.

9. Speak slowly and distinctly in a low register. A rapid rate at a high pitch indicates nervousness.

10. Prepare good notes in outline form and practice using them appropriately for an extemporaneous presentation.

D. Effective word choice for presentations: Guidelines

1. Use the active voice.

E.g., We initiated this program to engage scholars across disciplines.

Not: This program was initiated to engage scholars across disciplines.

2. Use personal language.

E.g., Our goal here is

Not: The goal here is

3. Use short words and short sentences.

E.g., We avoided problems in the following way.

Not: We circumvented problems by

4. Use explicit transitions.

E.g., First, we interviewed the participants. Let me describe

5. Use word pictures.

E.g., I think of cell phone movies as film haiku.

6. Use unbiased language.

E.g., To predict growth, we used a simple equation.

Not: To predict growth, we used an equation so easy even your mother (secretary, history major, etc.) could solve it.

E. Common speech structure cues

Skilled speakers use patterns that help the listener understand the content of their presentations. There are various rhetorical devices that a speaker uses to signal

progression from one part of the talk to the next. Used appropriately, these signals make a presentation clear, move the listeners smoothly along, and give the presentation coherence.

A critical listener is careful to recognize these signals and is then prepared for the organizational pattern that the speaker has indicated. For example, the comment “I am going to argue that Google’s Chinese policy is acceptable for a number of reasons.” alerts the audience to listen for a series of distinct arguments. On the other hand, the comment “I’d like us to look at how Google’s Chinese policy differs from its German policy.” indicates a comparative approach.

Some of the common speech structure cues are listed below.

Introduction cues

I’d like to start/begin by . . .
 Let’s begin with . . .
 By way of introduction, . . .
 I will first describe X and then I can explain . . .

Organization cues

- *Generalization/Specific*

Generally speaking, . . .	In general, . . .
On the whole, . . .	Overall, . . .
By and large, . . .	For the most part, . . .

- *Chronological Order*

To begin with, . . .	In the beginning, . . .	First, 2nd . . .
Then . . .	Next, . . .	Following this, . . .
Afterwards, . . .	Subsequently, . . .	Before . . .
Ultimately, . . .	Finally, . . .	

- *Explicit Movement*

That, then, is the first . . . ; let’s move on to another/the next . . .
 I’d like to now consider/turn to/examine . . .
 What are the advantages/results/ etc. of this approach?

Comparison/Contrast

Similarly, . . .	In like fashion, . . .
In contrast, . . .	In contrast to this, . . .
Likewise, . . .	On the one hand/on the other hand,

- *Cause/Effect*

As a result, . . .

Thus, . . .

If this occurs, then . . .

Because of this, . . .

The upshot of this is . . .

Therefore, . . .

The outcome of this . . .

Consequently, . . .

Main idea cues

Let me stress that . . .

Let me repeat. . .

This is a major factor. . .

Why was this so important?

I'd like to emphasize . . .

The principle point is . . .

The main idea is . . .

The remarkable thing is . . .

It is significant that . . .

Most important to remember is . . .

Example or detail cues

For one thing. . . for another . . .

Moreover, . . .

For instance, . . .

A few of these are . . .

Furthermore, . . .

For example, . . .

In the case of . . .

Also, . . .

In such a case, . . .

In addition, . . .

Past reference cues

As I said at the start of this presentation, . . .

As I mentioned earlier, . . .

In my introduction, I said . . .

You will remember the example of X I gave you earlier.

Future reference cues

I'll return to this in a few minutes.

I'll come back to this later.

I'll develop this in the next part of the presentation.

Digression cues

Incidentally, . . .

That reminds me. . .

By the way, . . .

But first, . . .

But before we get to that, . . .

That makes me think of . . .

Of course, . . .

First let me . . .

Amendment cues

I just remembered . . .
I almost forgot . . .

I forgot to mention . . .
I just realized . . .

Summary & conclusion cues

In conclusion, . . .
To summarize, . . .
In summary, . . .

Finally, . . .
To conclude, . . .
The final thought I'd like to leave you with

F. Guidelines for successful question and answer sessions

Question and answer sessions are useful for three reasons:

1. Listeners will be more attentive if they feel they have a chance to be involved.
2. The sessions can provide you with feedback on your subject.
3. You can judge from the questions and comments how well you have communicated your information.

You and your audience can benefit a great deal from the Q & A session if you

- Let your listeners know in advance how you would like to handle questions. Do you want them to ask questions as you speak? Would you prefer that they save their questions and comments for the end of the presentation?
- Set a time limit for the question and answer session in order to keep a lively pace and to limit long debates. As the time limit draws near, let the audience know by using an expression like "We have time for one more question."
- Remember to acknowledge and reward participants; check for satisfaction.
- Ask for clarification if you do not understand a question.
- Answer each question as directly, but as completely, as you can.
- Always remain calm and polite, even if your questioner is not. If necessary, suggest that the time limit precludes further discussion of an antagonist's question. Suggest that you meet to discuss his/her point after the presentation is over.
- Do not feel that you have to appear to know everything. Feel free to use one of the gambits below if you do not know the answer.

*I'm afraid that I can't answer your question.
Perhaps someone else can answer that.
I'll check and get back to you with that info.*

*I really can't say.
Frankly, I don't know.
It's impossible to say.*

G. Strategies for Effective Team Presentations

(Adapted from Mary Munter's *Guide to Managerial Communication*, P-H, 1999.)

The key to a successful team presentation is to ensure that it is organized, unified and coherent. Keep in mind the following six guidelines when planning.

Organize by content area. As a team, organize your total presentation into sections based on logical content areas, not on number of team members. Then decide on the order in which the areas will be presented. After the agenda is organized, decide who will cover which area. One speaker may cover two content areas or two speakers may divide up one area. Match personalities with content area. One team member should introduce and preview the entire presentation. The goal is to present a coherent whole with the content as the focus.

Provide graceful content transitions. Conclude your area with a section summary and a content link to the next section. Use the following speaker's name when linking to the next section.

Use visual aids consistently. Use the same technology, software, color scheme, font size, and layout throughout. Be sure each of you introduces your visual aids with statements that make clear your motivation for using them.

Rehearse as a group. Meet and practice your complete team presentation, introducing and concluding, using the exact transitions, and explaining your visuals as if "it's the real thing."

Answer questions consistently. When planning the presentation, decide on a question-and-answer format. If you decide to handle questions at the end, choose a facilitator to direct questions and decide whether you will sit or stand to answer questions.

Be a team player. When you are listening to other team members present their content areas, remember that you are still in the spotlight. Listen attentively and use listening body language to show your interest. If you indicate that you are distracted or bored with what your team members are saying, how can you expect others to listen actively?

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21L.020J Globalization: the Good, the Bad, and the In-Between
Fall 2016

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