EFFECTIVE ORAL PRESENTATIONS

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Oral Presentations: Delivering Information Face-to-face

The content is the most obvious component of any oral presentation - after all, if you are talking you had better have something worthwhile to say.

But an oral presentation, no matter how well-written, is only as effective as its delivery.

The people in the audience want you to succeed, but if you cannot hold their interest, the value of your presentation is questionable.

First Questions you have to ask yourself:

Why are you delivering this oral presentation?

Be honest with yourself. If your answer is "to get a good grade from my professor" or "because my boss told me to," you need to be aware of that fact now, because your audience will certainly figure it out soon enough.

What does your audience want?

The needs of the audience are always important. An oral presentation brings you into direct face-to-face contact with that audience.
HOW IS THE AUDIENCE ATTENTION´S CURVE?

The average attendee of a conference is by all means willing to listen to you, but he is also easily distracted. You should realize that only a minor part of the people have come specifically to listen to your talk. The rest is there for a variety of reasons, to wait for the next speaker, or to get a general impression of the field, or whatever.

Figure 1 illustrates how the average audience pays attention during a typical presentation of, let's say, 30 minutes. Almost everyone listens in the beginning, but halfway the attention may well have dropped to around 10-20% of what it was at the start. At the end, many people start to listen again, particularly if you announce your conclusions, because they hope to take something away from the presentation.

What can you do to catch the audience’s attention for the whole duration of your talk? The attention curve immediately gives a few recipes:

- Almost everyone listens in the beginning. This is THE moment to make clear that you will present work that the audience cannot afford to miss.
- If you want to get your message through, you should state it loud and clear in the beginning, and repeat it at the end.
- The best approach, however, is to divide your presentation in several parts, each ended by an intermediate conclusion, see Figure 2. People in the audience who got distracted can always easily catch up with you, particularly if you outline the structure of your talk in the beginning.
Figure 2: Ideal attention curve of an audience when the speaker divides his talk in recognizable parts, each summarized by intermediate conclusions. If people lose their attention for some reason, they can easily catch up with the speaker in one of his intermediate summaries.
12 TIPS FOR AN EFFECTIVE ORAL PRESENTATION:

1. Make frequent eye contact.

Write your whole speech out so you can read robotically if you blank out, but know your material well enough that you can look at your audience as you speak.

Position your visual aids or keyboard so that you never turn your back to your audience.

- Don’t hide behind the computer monitor when you run your PowerPoint presentation.
- Don’t stare down into the overhead projector, either; your audience isn’t down there.

2. Introductions and background sections are boring.

Don’t waste everyone’s time by giving us an entire lab report, or by dropping the names of all the authors you’ve consulted. A presenter who spends 15 minutes describing experimental procedures or positioning themselves theoretically -- but only 5 minutes presenting and analyzing the results of their original work -- has missed the point.
3. Get to the point.

An oral presentation is not a timed essay test, in which you get points for spewing out as many details as possible. Most people in your audience probably won't care how much your rats weighted, or what brand oscilloscope you used, or what version of MATLAB is running on your computer. If anybody is dying to know about such details, let them raise their hand and ask you. If the question is actually important to your talk, you'll probably be able to answer right away. If you can't, promise to check your notes and follow up via e-mail, and then go right back to your presentation.

4. Keep the audience interested.

Graphics, inspirational quotations, and anecdotes are all well-respected methods of maintaining audience interest. Overheads of Dilbert and The Far Side, fancy computer transitions between slides, and vaudeville tricks work in small doses, but they get old pretty quickly, and they eat up time that you could use more effectively. A less showy method of maintaining audience interest can be as simple as giving a kind of road map to your presentation.

5. Don't think about "delivering a speech".

Most inexperienced speakers who approach a professional oral presentation this way end up cutting themselves off from their audience.
6. Don’t try to recite from memory
If you spend your energy worrying about what you’re supposed to say next, you won’t be able to pay attention to whether the audience can hear you, or whether the overhead projections are focused. Don’t read word-for-word from a stack of papers. If you bother to show up to hear a person speak, how do you feel when the speaker mumbles through page after page of written text? Do you feel you should have just asked for a copy of the paper in the mail?
Instead, think about talking to people!

7. Make every effort to include your audience
After all, they are the reason you are speaking in the first place. If you do feel that you must write out your speech word-for-word, you should be familiar enough with it that you don’t need to look at the paper all the time

8. Remember that your audience wants your conclusions.
Many, many speakers spend too much time on background, which forces them to rush through their final statements.
Give a "Take-Home Message": Many speakers put a "Take-Home Message" up as the final slide of their talk. What is the one thing you want your audience to remember?

9. Rehearse
Rehearse your explanations of charts and diagrams, your demonstrations of software, or your visits to web pages just as thoroughly as your introductory and concluding statements. When you "wing it" you will tend to eat up too much time.

Know the venue. Find out how to shut off the lights, to lower the screen, to focus the overhead projector, etc.

10. Prepare for disasters
The network may crash, your monitor may start to flicker, or big beefy laborers may unplug your expensive equipment and cart it away because you didn’t hire a unionized operator, these things happen. Prepare a backup -- overhead projections or paper handouts to distribute.
11. Note about slides

Use visuals to help you explain, not as substitutes for explanation.

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but a thousand confusing or pointless words are no help!

If you put up a slide with a series of questions, each of the next slides should answer one question at a time. Don't just put up a slide with "Introduction, Discussion, Conclusion" or some other completely generic titles.

Your slides should present an abbreviated version of the content (not just framework) of your talk.

12. Watch the time!

- To help pace yourself, at the top of each page of your notes, write down what time it should be; as you turn each page, you can glance at the clock and see whether you are on track.

- If you are running behind, don't talk faster -- cut. Figure out in advance which examples, which anecdotes, which subsections you can drop, without damaging the whole presentation.

- A professor was at a conference where the first speaker talked for 40 minutes -- double her allotted time. Why the moderator allowed this is a mystery to me.
  - None of the other speakers on the panel felt like cutting their talks to compensate.
  - The result was that the last scheduled speaker -- who had paid for an international plane ticket and a week in a hotel -- did not get to speak at all.

Finally, the 12 steps we discussed all go back to two basic principles:

- First what is the message I want to convey, and
- Second, how does the audience understand this message best.
Are you nervous? Hopefully you are!

Only very few of us have been born as a talented speaker. Almost everyone will be nervous before a presentation.

First time speakers often interpret nervousness as a sign that they are apparently incapable of delivering a good presentation. This is not true. All the symptoms that accompany nervousness, such as frequent swallowing, trembling, transpiration, etc. are signs that your body is getting ready for something important. Athletes, stage performers, musicians, and... experienced speakers have learned to recognize these symptoms and to appreciate them. They start to worry when these symptoms stay away!

Experience is something that will come in time, by practicing and by analyzing your presentations and those by others. No one in the audience will blame you for being a beginner.

Rather than trying to stop your knees from shaking, let them shake, but realize that you can go on with your presentation. If, for example, your thoughts are on your sweating palms instead of on your material and its impact on your audience, then your audience may be attending to your nervousness as well.

The strategy is to focus on one aspect of your presentation rather than evaluating or criticising yourself as you go. If you can occupy your own “inner critic” with something other than evaluating your performance and feeding your nervousness, then you can free your concentration and energy to accomplish what you’ve set out to do - demonstrate your knowledge, and educate or motivate your audience!
SUGGESTED CRITERIA FOR AN EFFECTIVE ORAL PRESENTATION

1. The presentation was relevant to the audience.
2. The information presented was accurate and relevant.
3. The information presented was at the right level of detail.
4. The presentation was well organized and the ideas flowed logically.
5. The presenter’s introduction captured the interest of the audience.
6. The presenter established the purpose of the presentation during the introduction.
7. The presenter used evidence and examples to support his or her ideas.
8. The presenter reinforced the main ideas at the conclusion of the presentation.
9. The presenter carefully timed the presentation so that it “fit” into the time allowed.
10. The presenter established a comfortable environment.
11. The presenter showed evidence of being prepared by not overly relying on notes.
12. The presenter’s use of his or her voice was natural and effective.
13. The presenter’s hand and facial gestures were natural and effective.
14. The presenter controlled nervousness so that it did not distract the audience.
15. The presenter established eye contact with the audience.
16. Any humor used in the presentation was effective and not offensive.
17. The presenter’s use of visual aids was appropriate for the setting.
18. The presenter used visual aids primarily to emphasize key points.
19. Visual aids were professional looking and followed text size/amount guidelines.
20. The presenter effectively managed the use of visual aids by paraphrasing information presented on them and displaying them for an appropriate period of time.
21. The presenter stayed within the given time limits for making the presentation.
**Voluntary Exercise:**

- Write a list of your concerns about making an oral presentation.
- Now think about how you will manage your concerns and write your thoughts.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Does Not Meet Expectations</th>
<th>Meets Expectations</th>
<th>Outstanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information presented</td>
<td>Used inaccurate irrelevant, or inappropriate level of information that might hinder communication.</td>
<td>Used accurate, relevant information.</td>
<td>Used varied information, of which all was accurate, relevant, and at the right level of detail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall organization of presentation</td>
<td>Used unclear organization to present ideas.</td>
<td>Presented ideas in a somewhat organized manner.</td>
<td>Presented ideas in a polished, well organized manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Vague introduction. Didn’t introduce topic well.</td>
<td>Introduced topic with one or two brief sentences.</td>
<td>Introduction captured audience interests and established the purpose of the presentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body</td>
<td>Lacked facts or used inappropriate facts and examples that didn’t support main ideas. No logical sequence of information.</td>
<td>Presented with a logical sequence but not presented in a fluent manner.</td>
<td>Used evidence and examples to support main ideas in a fluent manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>No conclusion.</td>
<td>Vague conclusion.</td>
<td>Conclusion reinforced the main ideas in the presentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective use of time</td>
<td>Didn’t conclude presentation in assigned time or concluded earlier than the assigned time.</td>
<td>Kept to time limit and delivered in the assigned time.</td>
<td>Carefully timed so that it “fit” into the time allowed.Spent appropriate amount of time on topics, allowed time for questions, and answered questions effectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>The presenter didn’t care about establishing a comfortable environment.</td>
<td>The presenter had little control, but made as many adjustments as possible.</td>
<td>The presenter established a comfortable environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling nervousness</td>
<td>Presenter’s nervousness distracted the audience.</td>
<td>Presenter’s nervousness was apparent only occasionally.</td>
<td>The presenter controlled nervousness so that it did not distract the audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery of the subject</td>
<td>Read from notes most of the time, Searched for words frequently with long periods of silence.</td>
<td>Spoke with occasional hesitations without overly relying on notes.</td>
<td>The presenter showed evidence of being prepared by not overly relying on notes, and spoke in a fluent and spontaneous way.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>