

Talking Your Way to the Top With Style

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SUBSTANCE AND STYLE

In essence, there are two basic components to a good speech: the presentation style of the speaker and the substance of the speech. You absolutely need both components for overall effectiveness. Obviously, what you say is very important. However, how you say it is equally as important. It will determine how well your audience responds to your presentation. Learning the craft of public speaking requires understanding how style and substance work together to create meaningful and interesting speeches. It also requires time, preparation, and patience.

PART I: SUBSTANCE

Preparing the Speech

Identify the Topic

The first step in the preparation process is to determine the subject or topic you will address. In most situations, you will know the topic beforehand. However, if this is not the case, one way to determine a topic worthy of consideration is to create a list of ideas, concepts, or issues in which you are interested, concerned, or knowledgeable. Most will agree it is usually best to talk about things which you already know or are interested in learning more.

The topic you select is important because enthusiasm and interest are conveyed in your body language and heard in your voice. If you are unfamiliar or uninterested in the topic, it will be difficult to deliver an effective presentation. It is best to select a topic that reflects what is important to the audience and to you.

Health educators are communicators. The heart and soul of what we do is done through some form of communication. A recent survey of employers revealed that writing and public speaking were the top two most desirable skills for entry-level practitioners. Although a great resume, references, and interviewing skills may get you the job, being able to communicate effectively will go a long way in helping you keep the job and advance to a higher position. It probably would be safe to assume that most health educators, given a choice, would rather develop materials than give a speech or presentation. Public speaking creates anxiety for most people. However, by following a few basic principles of speech preparation and delivery, your level of anxiety can be diminished and your performance improved.

If the topic is very broad, you will usually need to focus on one particular aspect. Attention should be paid to the most relevant characteristics of the topic, taking into consideration the venue and audience.

Identify the Purpose

After you clearly identify the topic, consider the purpose or reason for the presentation or speech. Generally, there are three reasons for giving a speech: to persuade, inform, or entertain.

If your goal is to persuade, you usually seek to influence listeners in some way. If you want to inform, you generally seek to expand knowledge about an idea, person, or process. If your goal is to entertain, your objective is to charm and relax listeners.

The purpose of your speech will determine the best way to approach your topic. An

excellent way to clearly identify what you hope to accomplish is to write a purpose statement. In one or two sentences, indicate the topic of your speech and its purpose. For example, “The purpose of my speech is to inform the audience about the hazards of smoking.”

Although the purpose statement may appear to be an obvious starting place, many novice speakers overlook the absolute necessity of clearly identifying the subject and purpose before researching the topic. Obviously, a speech intended to persuade will be different from a speech intended to entertain. Clearly defining your goal helps you and your audience focus attention on what is important. Think about it like this: If you do not have a clear destination, how will you know when you have arrived?

Know Your Audience

After you have clearly stated your topic and purpose, you need to identify to whom you will be speaking. Understanding your audience is an extremely important part of the speech writing and delivery process. Ideally, you want your audience interested in what you have to say.

To ensure listeners tune into your presentation, it is essential to understand their backgrounds, interests, and concerns. The age, educational level, professional experience, gender, group membership, and cultural and/or ethnic background of the audience provide clues to the issues of concern and interest. Although audience members may have experience with a particular issue, each demographic group may have a different point of view. Respecting these differences is essential for suc-

cessful speech delivery. Listeners are more likely to pay attention to a speaker who understands and affirms their perspectives. By taking the demographic characteristics into consideration, you will be better able to meet the audience’s information needs.

Demographic information may be gleaned from your needs assessment or community profile data and should be obtained prior to speech preparation. If it is not possible to acquire demographic information on the participants prior to the speaking event, then consider these questions: Who else is presenting? What is the purpose of the program or conference? What does the literature identify as possible values, interests, and so forth of this group?

The more knowledgeable you are about the audience, the more interesting your speech will be for them. Speakers who are able to adapt to the needs, concerns, and values of the audience are more successful.

Organize Your Ideas

Once you have identified the purpose and topic of your speech, it is time to organize the overall structure or outline. There are four common ways to organize a presentation: chronological, spatial, topical, or causal (Lucas, 1998). By following one of the organization themes, you will be able to highlight important categories for the audience. Because it is more difficult to make sense of what we hear as opposed to what we read, it is extremely important to present ideas clearly and logically. “Oral communication requires explicit organization, greater redundancy, and simpler sentence structure” (Wood, 2001, p. 285).

The organization method you use will depend on the topic and the purpose of your speech. Different types of information more or less lend themselves to one of the four organization schemes. Using a scheme enables listeners to easily make sense of information.

The first method, chronological organization, adds a time sequence structure to your ideas. What happened first? How did it influence or impact what occurred later? Arranging information in this manner provides logical time development to your ideas. However, where to begin and where to end the chronology will depend on the audience, your purpose, and the topic. It may not be necessary to present a day-by-day account. Again, you must consider your overall objective. If, for example, your topic is cognitive developmental stages, you could organize information into children’s grade levels in school. By starting with what happens in preschool and logically moving toward high school, you

provide a chronological sequence to the stages of development.

Spatial patterns are the relative position, direction, or location of major points to be discussed. Issues or ideas can be presented from top to bottom, left to right, or east to west. Let us say you are discussing a new program implementation within your organization. If you were to organize spatially, you may want to discuss how each state division, starting with offices on the east coast and moving west, will be effected. Other topics easily lend themselves to spatial organization. For example, if you are discussing the complications of hypertension, you may start with the head and discuss strokes, move down to the retina, and then to the heart and kidneys.

Topical organization is a popular method for arranging issues or ideas that easily lend themselves to classification. For example, if you were discussing the impact of new health care legislation, you may address how it affects families, caregivers, and service providers. Your goal is to organize information into easily understood categories. Topical organization is the most popular format for speeches (German, Gronbeck, Ehniger, & Monroe, 2000). How information is arranged will heavily depend on the topics under consideration.

Causal organization shows how one event effected or caused another. This is an excellent way to focus the listeners' attention and provide coherence to how the ideas are related. You can either arrange causal patterns by cause-effect, sun exposure (cause) and skin cancer (effect), or effect-cause, skin cancer (effect) and sun exposure (cause).

In addition, a solution to a problem or issue raised may be included. For example, let us say you want to persuade the audience that television-viewing habits (cause) encourage adolescent violence (effect). In this situation, including a solution, such as monitoring television viewing or educating youth about media, is appropriate. Cause-effect-solution patterns of organization lend themselves well to more complex ideas and arguments. Using this pattern allows the speaker to focus attention on exactly how or why one event is related to or caused by another.

Selecting the most appropriate organization theme will depend on the topic, the purpose of your speech, the audience's information interests, and your final goal. Once you have decided the most effective way to present your topic, you will need to start writing the detailed outline.

Writing the Speech

The Outline

A detailed outline is usually the best way to organize information and develop your thoughts about a topic. Think of the outline as your roadmap. You identify a starting location, the major streets, the side streets, and the final destination. It includes an introduction, major categories, subtopics related to each major category, a main idea for each major category, supporting information such as statistics and/or quotes, and a conclusion. Each major heading should contain one main idea; less important points should subordinate the more important ones. Three to five major headings are appropriate and should mirror the organization theme. More than five categories are difficult for listeners to remember. If the topic lends itself to more categories, collapse information into broader content areas. For example, if you are discussing the history of an event, you might divide it into decades or time periods. Supporting information should follow, where appropriate. If the information does not fit within your scheme, you probably should not use it. Too much information can be confusing and overwhelming for the audience. By organizing information into clearly understood categories, it is much easier for listeners to understand and remember.

Speech Structure

There are three common parts to a well-structured speech: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. The primary purpose of the introduction is to provide a context and structure for the topic or to tell the audience what issues you are going to address. In the body of the speech, you discuss main ideas and present supporting materials, as mentioned in the introduction. The conclusion is where you restate what was just discussed and provide next steps. Each part of the speech serves a specific purpose and depends on the other two for overall coherence. Without an introduction and conclusion, a speech is not as effective.

Speech introductions are like movie trailers. The audience receives a quick preview of what is to come later, which sets the stage for the rest of your speech. The first few minutes of the speech are important to your overall effectiveness as a speaker because it is the audience's first impression of you and the subject. It should create curiosity and raise awareness. How you introduce your subject should relate to the organization theme you selected. Clearly presenting the topic in the

beginning of the presentation avoids later confusion. The introduction creates a sense of coherence to your speech and allows listeners to follow along easily.

In addition to providing the audience with the topic, purpose, and main ideas of your speech, the introduction is a time to create interest in the subject matter. You can begin with an interesting statistic or quote to help pique interest. Perhaps you want to refer to the significance of an event or share something about yourself with the audience. Consider telling a story related to the topic, quoting a famous individual, or telling a joke. There are many ways to create interest. Think of what best meets your needs. For example, a joke may not be well received in certain situations. Perhaps you are better off telling the audience an interesting story related to the topic. Before deciding, consider the audience, the venue, and your purpose.

After you have piqued interest, you will need to sustain it. The body or main part of the speech is where you provide details to the issues raised during the introduction. Major headings, main ideas, and supporting documentation will be presented at this time. Statistics, quotations, and examples breathe life into the presentation and should be used to support your ideas. Without supporting materials, audience members are less likely to engage with the presentation. A speech without supporting materials is like a map without side streets. Although you can see where you are and where you would like to go, you will have a difficult time getting there.

Locating supporting information may require research. The Internet or the library is a great place to start your search. When using information from the Internet, it is particularly important to pay close attention to the credibility of the Web site where you have obtained your information. Anyone can state anything they wish on the Internet. As a result, some information may not be factual. Because speakers are given a position of power, you must always consider the ethical implications of what you present as true or factual. Providing false or misleading information may be damaging to your credibility. In addition, false or misleading information may prove harmful to audience members. Always check facts before including them in your speech. Remember, once something has been said, it cannot be taken back easily.

The conclusion is a natural close to your presentation. The purpose here is to briefly restate the ideas discussed and remind listeners about what they just heard. It may appear unusual to restate what you already have mentioned in the introduction and the body of the

speech, but it is necessary for a variety of reasons. First, the conclusion indicates the speech is ending. This avoids awkward moments for the speaker and the audience. Second, restating verbal information is essential for successful presentations. It gently reminds listeners of the importance of your topic. Third, audience members can reflect on next steps, if any.

The conclusion can be constructed in a variety of ways. After you restate the issues discussed, you can use a quote or illustration to emotionally emphasize your main idea. The conclusion should flow logically and emotionally from what you stated during the body and introduction, creating a sense of closure and completeness.

PART 2: STYLE

Preparation and Practice

The second facet of public speaking is the presentation style of the speaker. Preparation and practice are important to the overall presentation because when we are more prepared, we usually are more confident, and when we are more confident, we are less likely to have anxiety. If you fear speaking in public, practice will have a positive impact on your performance. If you want to improve your delivery style, practice will help to improve less effective communication patterns. Like the old adage reminds us, practice makes perfect. Whether you are anxious about presenting or want to better your communication style, paying close attention to the delivery process will improve your performance. One way to do this is by rehearsing what you are going to say.

How should you do this? Should you use a written speech and memorize it word for word, or should you use a speaking outline? Although some people prefer using a written speech for presentations, it is usually not advisable. Using a written speech instead of a speaking outline can create some anxiety because it may encourage the speaker to read from his or her document. This is problematic for two reasons. First, reading a speech encourages reliance on the written document and discourages the speaker from engaging with the audience. Nothing is more frustrating for listeners than viewing the top of a speaker's head during a presentation because he or she is reading from a document. Second, there is a high probability that while speaking, you may lose your place in an overly complex written document.

A speaking outline is a better choice because it includes all major categories, supporting information, and key words and phrases instead of complete sentences. In this way, you are able to refer to the notes but not rely on word-for-word guidance. Because eye contact is extremely important for speech delivery, a speaking outline is beneficial to use during the presentation. However, it usually is advisable to write complete sentences when accuracy is necessary. Direct quotes and statistics generally are written in their entirety to avoid misquoting or misrepresenting a topic.

Visual Aids

Images dominate our everyday lives, and many people rely heavily on visual communication for information. "Visual materials enhance your presentation in two ways: They aid listener comprehension and memory, and they add persuasive impact to your message" (German et al., 2000, p. 210). Visual aids are an important part of the speech delivery process.

There are many types of visual information, including pictures, slides, video clips, written handouts, graphs, overhead projections, models, and other physical objects. What you use will depend on your topic, but they should support the verbal information and complement, not distract from, the presentation.

When using visual aids, practice delivering the speech with them. It is advisable to decide in advance when and how each visual aid will be used. If, for example, you are using audiovisual equipment, walk through the process of using the equipment. Always confirm your audiovisual equipment needs in advance. Handouts should be visually appealing, free of errors, and easy to understand.

Nonverbal Communication

It is not only what you say but also how you say it. Your voice and body language convey meanings that can complement or contradict verbal information. How important is nonverbal communication? Research suggests 58% of a message is dependent on the speaker's nonverbal behaviors (Wood, 2001). This implies it is not only the words and ideas expressed that are important but also how the words and ideas are articulated through body language, eye contact, dress, and tone of voice. Are you sincere, enthusiastic, and interested in your topic? While practicing, consider effective ways to use the voice and body to reinforce your enthusiasm.

For example, smiling at the audience creates feelings of pleasantness. Using the body and voice effectively, speakers are more likely to engage listeners, create interest, and inspire. When used ineffectively, listeners may be distracted, bored, and unconvinced of the importance of the topic.

Nonverbal behaviors reflect emotions and reinforce verbal messages. An effective speaker is conscious and aware of how his or her nonverbal communication affects the listening experience. Hand gestures, facial expressions, use of space, use of time, physical appearance, and vocal intonations are aspects of nonverbal behavior. Is it possible to control nonverbal behaviors? In many instances, the answer is "Yes." For example, clothing, hand movements, and facial expressions usually can be controlled. Pay close attention to how you convey meaning nonverbally. Are you angry or sad? How does your voice and facial expression change with the emotion you are feeling? Some people speak quickly when nervous. If this is the case, pay attention to the rate at which you speak. What does your body language suggest? Good posture usually indicates confidence, whereas poor posture can convey uncertainty. When conscious of behaviors, it is easier to control them before they become problematic for listeners.

Some speakers display nervous habits while speaking. Pulling on clothing, unconsciously tapping a pen, and pacing are a few of the nonverbal behaviors practice can identify and correct prior to presentation. If possible, videotape yourself while practicing. This is the best method for catching any unusual habit of which you are not aware. If it is not possible to videotape, it is advisable to audiocassette record your speech. Although you cannot see yourself, you will be able to hear what you say and how you say it. There is not a standard number of times to practice a speech. Some people may require more time, others less. At the minimum, you should feel confident and relatively comfortable with your presentation. However, too much practice can lead to sounding mechanical, so it will be necessary to find a balance that works for you.

CONCLUSION

There is not one right way to create and present a speech. However, certain methods are more effective and better suited for certain situations. In most circumstances, the following issues will need to be addressed: the topic and purpose of the speech, how to best orga-

nize information, the demographic characteristics of the audience, what and how visual aids will be used, how to locate supporting information, and how to use nonverbal behaviors effectively during delivery. With patience, learning to create and deliver a speech can be an exciting opportunity to share what you know and showcase your public-speaking abilities. Like painting or drawing, speech writing and delivery require forethought and creativity. With determination and preparation, a successful presentation is within your reach.

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