

Tips for Giving A Professional Talk

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Giving a Talk

Psychologists report that some people are more afraid of speaking in public than dying. Yet, much of daily life revolves around oral communication. You greet people. You ask questions and express opinions. You give and get information. Your ability to articulate your ideas often determines your happiness. Your voice, tone, body language, and appearance combine to communicate information to others. This is also true of speaking to the public. Fortunately, guidelines are available for effective public speaking, whether talking to small groups of people or giving formal presentations to large audiences. As with other effective communications, a good talk is entertaining, relevant to the audience, and organized around a theme.

The organization of a talk includes an introduction, body, and conclusion. The introduction provides a short, crisp explanation of your presentation and defines the purpose of your talk for the audience. It reveals the theme and why your subject is important. The introduction presents a road map to help your audience follow the talk. The introduction also should present the organization of the talk. Studies have shown that audiences that are given the theme at the beginning of a talk will have better recall of it later.¹

The introduction also creates a supportive atmosphere for learning and captures the audience's attention. Acknowledge your audience and grab their attention with questions, a quotation, an illustration, a story, a picture, or an attention-getting generalization. Why should the audience listen? Tell them something that affects them directly, for example, "We all drink water from the Orange Creek watershed, but do you know where the water's been?" Or give an illustration that relates the subject to your audience. A provocative statement opening your talk may help convince the audience to stay. "Picture yourself in a situation where the only food you can eat..."

The body of the speech presents the factual support for your theme. As the theme is developed, key points are made in a logical sequence and the audience follows along as you elaborate on the theme. Limit your talk to five or fewer main points to illustrate or prove your message. The amount of information you include in the body will depend on the amount of time you have. The use of stories and anecdotes can illustrate your meaning and keep the audience's attention.

The conclusion of your speech is the climax. Reemphasize your theme or take home messages and tie the conclusion back to the opening of your talk. You might want to finish the talk in a memorable way with an anecdote, poem, visual image, or quote. Don't fade away. Conclude!

Also, do not forget to use smooth transitions between the opening, body, and conclusion of the speech. Transitions provide continuity and make the talk easy to understand. Transitions also are needed between each main point you are making. A good transition should summarize the preceding idea, establish the relationship between the preceding and following ideas, and preview the next idea.ⁱⁱ For example: “Now that we know what pollinates the flower, let’s see what happens to its seeds.”

Some tips for giving a successful presentation are summarized below.

- Practice ahead of time. As Mark Twain said, “It takes three weeks to prepare a good ad-lib speech.” Make sure your talk is the proper length of time. Thirty to 45 minutes is the maximum length for an auditorium program. Orientation presentations should be only five to 15 minutes long.
- Adapt your talk to your audience’s background and interests. Simplify things and do not give unneeded detail. Stick to your theme.
- Talk to the audience. Do not hide behind a podium. Stand where the audience can see you and talk directly to them. If you need to write on the board, or point at a slide, stop talking while your back is turned. Then continue. Make eye contact with the audience. Some speakers like to pick out a few people in the audience in different areas of the room to focus on during their talk.
- Talk at a rate of 100-125 words per minute. Talk clearly, do not mutter. Vary the pitch and tone of your voice.
- Use hand gestures and body language to help tell your story and keep the audience’s attention. Put your whole body into your presentation. Facial expressions and body movements can show pleasure, enthusiasm, pain, and sorrow. Gesture with your hands and arms to show shape and location. Emphasize an important point by pounding your fist or pointing your finger. You may want to record or videotape a practice talk to evaluate how you do. Watch politicians as they deliver speeches and see how gestures may work for you.
- Use visual aids to complement your talk. Slides, props, overhead projections, chalkboards, and other visual cues can make presentations more interesting and memorable. Make sure charts and graphs are simple and clear if you use them, and make sure the entire audience can see the visual aids you use.
- Do not worry if you are nervous. It is good to be a little nervous. Most people feel a sense of anxiety before a talk. This can make you seem enthusiastic and help you stay focused on the presentation. Your own interest in and enthusiasm for the subject will be contagious.
- End on time. Leave time for questions or discussion at the end.

The best way to improve your presentation is to carefully evaluate it. You can make a videotape of your practice talk or ask a colleague to give you critical feedback. Feedback from your audience, using comment forms or other methods, provides even more direct evidence of the success of your talk.

Tips for Presenting a Slide-show or Power Point presentation

Slide-shows are traditional media used for scientific presentations that illustrate a topic with a succession of slides. Many of the guidelines for slide shows also apply to power point presentations. Similar to the public talks described above, a slide-show

should weave a unified story around a theme. The sequence of slide images and accompanying narration should have a cohesive beginning, middle and end.

It is easy to lull an audience to sleep with a slide-show: just turn out the lights, speak in a monotonous tone, and show slides that are hard to see, out of focus, repetitive, or irrelevant to the theme. To ensure a quality slide talk:

- Arrange for someone to operate the lights and projector and to trouble-shoot any problems so that you can remain in front of the audience.
- Talk to the audience before showing slides in order to establish rapport before plunging the room in darkness.
- Always preview the slides to ensure none are backwards or upside down. Make sure they will show up clearly in the darkened room.
- Slides should be organized in sequences to develop a single idea. For example if your point is to describe forest growth, a wide view of a pine forest will orient the viewer. Follow this by closer shots of pine trees, pine cones, and finally pine seedlings. Slide sequences are especially good at showing before and after conditions, and cause and effect images.
- Link sequences of the slides with transitions to make your presentation flow.
- Use slide sequences to reveal the complex nature of a specific topic, such as adding more details to a diagram or additional items to a list. Revealing information progressively also adds an air of mystery and interest to your talk.
- Use high quality slides: clear subject, in focus, with good composition and color
- Show close-up slides so the audience can see details.
- Include people in some of your slides. People like to look at other people.
- For text slides use symbols and bullets to minimize the number of words. Use simple fonts and large lettering. Avoid crowding too much information on a slide. Graphs, like bar graphs and pie charts, are easier to read than tables.
- Vary the length of time you leave each slide illuminated, from a few seconds to a minute or more. On average, show slides at a rate of one slide per 15 seconds, with a maximum up to a minute, depending on the text or image. Once the slide no longer pertains to your narration, change the slide. Don't let the audience contemplate the image for longer than is necessary to illustrate your particular point.
- Do not introduce each slide, for example, "This is a Florida panther." Instead, make your point: "Less than a hundred Florida panthers are left in the wild." The slide should enhance your narration.
- Change your voice inflection to keep the audience's attention. They can not see your enthusiastic hand gestures in the dark.
- Your narration should anticipate the next slide and smoothly transition to it in advance of flashing it on the screen.
- Do not blind the audience with an empty white screen between slides or at the end of the talk. Put in blank slides if your projector does not automatically blacken the screen when no slides drop.
- Always face your audience (not the slide!). Stand to the side of the screen and don't block it.
- Additional equipment to add sounds to your narration or animation to your power point presentation can make your presentation more interesting and entertaining.
- Practice your talk. Again!

ⁱ Thorndyke, P. 1977. Cognitive structures in comprehension and memory of narrative discourse. *Cognitive Psychology* 9(1):77-110.

ⁱⁱ Lewis, W.J. 1980. *Interpreting for Park Visitors*. Eastern Acorn Press, Eastern National Park & Monument Association, Philadelphia, PA.