

HOW TO PREPARE AN

Oral Presentation

ACCORDING TO SPEAKING CONSULTANT Lilyan Wilder (1999), two of the greatest myths about delivering oral presentations are that you're better off "winging it" and that good speakers are "naturals."

In order to give an effective presentation, it is necessary to prepare and practice, practice, practice. Despite the need to prepare, one of your goals still should be to sound spontaneous and comfortable while delivering your message in a clear, organized, and stimulating fashion. The information below should help you achieve this goal:

FIRST STEPS

THERE ARE A FEW steps you need to take before writing your presentation, including thinking about who your audience is, what the expectations for the speech are, and selecting an appropriate topic.

Researching the topic

If you are presenting something that you've already written, then this step won't require much work. Otherwise, you'll need to follow the same procedures as with writing and narrowing down your topic for a research paper.

Organizing and writing the speech

This requires a different approach than writing a research paper.

Practicing the speech and handling logistics

There are a number of details to prepare for in advance of delivering your presentation.

Phrasing the speech

A presentation requires different language and phrasing than a written document. A presentation is a dialogue. It should sound natural and be somewhat conversational.

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Managing your stage fright

If you are shy, or unaccustomed to talking to a group of people, there are things you can do to make yourself less anxious.

Visual aids

The big event

It's important to present yourself and your material in a polished, yet comfortable, fashion. If you've followed the ideas listed above, it should be a successful experience.

Web sites of Interest

We have identified a number of Web sites offering information about preparing oral presentations and related issues.

References

PRELIMINARY STEPS FOR PREPARING AN ORAL PRESENTATION

Analyzing the situation

BEFORE YOU DECIDE on a topic for your speech, it's important to think about how to make your presentation interesting to your teacher and classmates. This may sound obvious, but have you looked at the material that you've covered so far in class? How could you relate what you want to say to what's already been taught? Relating your material to information your audience is already familiar with will not only demonstrate to the teacher that you've been paying attention, it will also help your classmates understand and remember your points.

Example: If you've examined a particular novelist in your literature class, you may want to refer to that novelist again in your talk on literary styles.

Know how much time you have, how loudly you will need to speak for your classmates to hear you, and how many people will be in the audience. These facts will help determine the depth of your talk, the visual aids you can use, and the environment for your presentation.

Choosing a topic and a focus

Choose a topic that not only excites you, but one about which you either are an expert or can become one. You may not have a choice about your topic, but regardless of the subject, you still make decisions about what direction you're going to take. Try to relate your topic to current issues, whether they are happening at your school, in your city, or in the world. Timeliness can make a presentation more interesting to your audience.

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In order to focus on a topic, follow these steps:

Determine your general goal, *e.g.*, to talk about recycling in the city.

Develop a precise objective, *e.g.*, to instruct people about the recycling facilities and programs in the city of Chicago.

Develop a precise objective, *e.g.*, to instruct people about the recycling facilities and programs in the city of Chicago.

Develop a one-sentence summary, *e.g.*, There are many recycling facilities in the city of Chicago that are not fully used.

Develop a title, *e.g.*, The Underuse of Chicago's Recycling Facilities.

Although there may be some overlap, try to decide what your main goal will be. This will help give your paper direction and consistency. Some important main goals include:

- **Interest**
- **Inform**
- **Persuade**
- **Motivate**

Researching the Topic

Collect more information than you think you need. As you prepare your presentation, you will whittle away at your notes and tighten your focus. Organize your information the same way that you would for a research paper.

Recommendation:

Read through your finished notes and label each section with a number or word that tells you where each thought fits into your outline (discussed in the next section of this Guide). Then, when you start to flesh out your presentation, you can quickly skim and organize your notes.

ORGANIZING AND WRITING THE SPEECH

DEVELOPING AN ORAL presentation is different than writing a report that will be read silently. The audience can't turn back to the first part of your speech and examine what you said. That's why speakers often repeat themselves throughout their presentations. The informal formula for public speaking is "First, tell the audience what you are going to tell them; then tell them; then tell them what you just told them."

You should follow this same mantra when structuring the notes that will serve as the basis for your oral presentation. Not only should you repeat some things, but you should also be extremely organized, so your listeners can easily follow what you say.

The first step to take before writing your speech is to create an outline. Write down three to four main points, fill them in with subheadings, and then add third-level subheadings. Make each point a complete sentence. This skeletal structure will be the outline for your other notes, and

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eventually, the speech itself. Most word processing software includes an outlining feature, which may help.

Suggested organization:

Introduction

In addition to your main points, you need an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction should capture the audience's attention and warm you up. Some experts recommend humor, but exercise caution; if your joke falls flat, you immediately lose your audience. It's better to start on a genuine note. Some suggestions (*Dodd, 1997*) for introductions include:

- **Refer to a local event or a recent event in the news**
- **Tell a personal story, preferably one that is humorous**
- **Read a quote**
- **Ask a question**
- **Refer to something that's just happened in class**

No matter which of these devices you use, they should be tied somehow to your topic. Make a statement that somehow connects the introduction to the body of the talk.

Main points

Include at least three or four main points.

Conclusion

Either end with a concluding statement or invite questions, or both. When you end your speech, only use the words "in conclusion," "finally," or "one more thing" if you are really finished. Also, don't end your speech suddenly without recapping what you've said (remember to remind your audience of what you've just told them).

PRACTICING THE SPEECH AND HANDLING LOGISTICS

YOU SHOULD PRACTICE your speech at least once before you present it. Practice in an environment that is as similar as possible to where you'll be giving the presentation. Practice in front of people and use your visual aids. Your talk should be a combination of entertainment, information, and intellectual stimulation, all delivered with a spontaneous and comfortable feel. The following guidelines will help you achieve this:

Do not memorize a paper and deliver it verbatim. You may want to memorize certain small sections, and you will want to know the order of your presentation by heart, but the goal is to sound natural. Reading lines does not sound spontaneous unless you're a really good actor.

Write in large, boldface letters, regardless of whether you use note cards or regular paper for your notes. In order to engage your audience, you should look up from your paper or notes several times during the presentation, and you don't want to lose your place when you look back down at the text. Using note cards makes it easier to find your place, but some people don't like flipping through cards.

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Try recording yourself and listening to the tone, pitch, and speed of your voice. Work on sounding natural and relaxed.

Pause naturally as you would in conversation.

Practicing your speech out loud can help you clarify your thoughts. As you practice, don't be afraid to add ideas or change what you've planned.

You may want to add directions on your notes like “slow down,” “look at the audience,” and “remember to pause.” These will remind you to do the things that are sometimes hard to remember during the excitement of speaking in front of a group.

Logistics

If you're going to use any kind of equipment, make sure that everything is in working order before you arrive for your presentation. Try to anticipate what problems might arise, and how to solve them. For example, “what will I do if the computer crashes?” Or, “what will I do if the person who speaks before me takes up too much time, and I have to shorten my speech?” Be prepared for all the possible things that can go wrong.

If you're not giving your presentation in a familiar location (like your classroom), check out the space before the day of your presentation so you know how big the room is and what kind of technical options are available (and functioning). Will you need a microphone? Is there an

Internet hook-up? Do the electrical outlets and lights work? How are they controlled? If you will need a projection screen, is there one already in the room? If so, how does it work? These are all important details.

PHRASING THE SPEECH

YOU SHOULD USE different language for an oral presentation than you would for a research paper. A speech should not sound as formal as a report. Remember that you're talking, and that people will respond better when the language is familiar. Here are a few ways in which oral communication differs from written (*Dodd, 1997*):

- **More audience-specific**
- **More interactive**
- **More immediate**
- **More personal**
- **More informal**
- **More opportunities to use visual communication**

Not only is the style of a presentation different from that of a paper, but the language is as well. Here are a few considerations for phrasing your oral presentation:

- **Use conjunctions—they sound more natural.**

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- Use vocabulary that will be understood. Your audience won't have time to look up unfamiliar words.
- Use enumeration to tie your points together. (*i.e.*, First I would like to discuss this issue. Second ...)
- Use parallel construction in your phrasing to help the audience follow what you're saying.
- Use personal pronouns and refer to yourself and the audience.
- Interject ideas and comments—make it personal!
- Ask occasional questions.

With all of this advice about what you should say, it's easy to forget one of the most important tips of all—do not be afraid of silence! Pause occasionally.

MANAGING STAGE FRIGHT

A RECENT STUDY suggests that people unfamiliar with communication theory think that stage fright is caused mostly by what happens during the speech (*Bippus & Daly, 1999*). In actuality, what happens before the speech affects your state of mind as much—if not more—than the speech itself. In other words, practicing and preparing are two of the best ways to eliminate stage fright.

Overcoming Stage Fright

Practice in a place or situation as similar as possible to where you will be giving your talk. This includes practicing in front of people, preferably classmates.

Watch or listen to other speeches, either in person or through (audio or video) recordings. Take note of what works and what doesn't.

Use mental imagery to picture yourself in front of an audience. Try to become comfortable with the idea.

Before you practice, and again before you deliver your presentation, **perform voice and breathing exercises to warm up your vocal cords.**

If your hands shake, hold on to something like a small object, a pointer, or a lectern.

Have water with you if possible, both during practice and while presenting.

Take pauses and breathe normally.

Try to **establish a dialogue with the audience.** This will make the whole experience feel more natural.

VISUAL AIDS

WHEN YOU CREATE and display visual aids during an oral presentation, there are a few general principles that you should follow.

Keep it simple

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Use color, but not too much

Color accelerates learning and recall by 55% or more and comprehension by 70% (Dodd, 1997). But too much color can be distracting.

Break complex ideas into simpler visual parts

If you plan to show a complex idea visually, break the image into smaller, less complicated parts. An overlay is a possible option.

Show = Discuss

Do not show anything that you don't plan to discuss. Explain what's in each graphic.

Do not talk at your visual aid

Direct your presentation toward the audience and refer to your images with a pointer or pen.

Steady hands

If your hands are shaky, a pointer, pen, or pencil will help steady you.

You can use the following options, but beware of the problems associated with each:

Overheads are simple and clear, and you don't have to depend on a computer. They can, however, get out of order, have poor print quality, and cause other problems if the transition between each one is not smooth. If you are able, have someone else be responsible for turning your overheads during your presentation, so you can concentrate on speaking and directing the overall presentation.

PowerPoint or similar **slide-show software** programs can produce professional-looking presentations. You can store your presentation on a disk and carry it with you, and it's also easy to make changes to your presentation. However, using such software does force dependence on computer technology, and if the computer crashes, or if there are other technology problems, you won't have your slide-show. Therefore, when you use such software, always have available alternative visuals such as overheads or paper handouts.

Slides give you clear images of photographs and also allow for easy change in the order of your presentation. However, they can be expensive, and you can't change the images once they're created.

Whiteboards and paper are convenient if you feel comfortable writing your points in front of the audience. They also let you be spontaneous and incorporate feedback from the audience. However, they don't look as professional as other media, and they force you to spend a lot of time writing when you should be talking (often with your back to the audience).

Handouts are an excellent accompaniment to any of the options listed above, but they can also pose their own problems. If you distribute them at the beginning of your presentation, you risk losing your audience's attention; their attention may turn to the handout rather than following what you are saying.

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Nevertheless, having the audience follow along with the handout can be a successful strategy. You can also pass out a summary of your speech that the audience can take away with them. A final option is to pass out handouts to support the information you bring up as you talk. However, this can also deflect attention away from you, and cause the audience to miss pertinent points. Be sparing with handouts, but understand that they can be instrumental in helping the audience remember your speech.

THE BIG EVENT

IN ADDITION TO some common sense tips—like getting a good night’s sleep the night before and eating breakfast—here are some other helpful ideas.

- **Warm up with breathing and vocal exercises.**
- **Take a deep breath before walking to the front of the room.**
- **Walk slowly to the front, pause, and look at the audience before speaking.**
- **Learn to be comfortable with the sound of your voice.**
- **Remember to pause.**
- **Focus on the audience, not your notes or visual aids.**
- **Try to change the tone of your speech periodically to keep the audience’s attention.**

When it’s all over, ask for feedback, and remember that this is a learning experience. You’ll continue to become a better public speaker the more times you go through this process.

WEB SITES OF INTEREST

Effective Presentations Online Tutorial, University of Kansas
<http://www.kumc.edu/SAH/OTEd/jradel/effective.html>

Dos and Don’ts of Oral Presentation, Voice For Success
http://voiceforsuccess.com/doc3_pub.html

Making an Oral Presentation, University of Toronto
<http://www.ecf.toronto.edu/~writing/oral.htm>

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