



# Teaching and Persuasive Communication: Class Presentation Skills

A HANDBOOK FOR FACULTY, TEACHING ASSISTANTS AND TEACHING FELLOWS

B R O W N   U N I V E R S I T Y

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# Preface

**W**E OFTEN HEAR even seasoned actors state that they always have stage fright before a performance. Why? Because there is always a risk associated with standing out from the crowd and speaking your piece – whether that piece has been written by another or is the product of your own imagination. But messages need transmitting, visions need describing, lessons need teaching, and inspiration needs spreading – and often the best forum for these tasks is that in which a lone speaker imparts his or her understanding to an audience.

How does the speaker convey a message? How do the channels through which a message is transmitted affect its meaning? How much control does the speaker have on the proper receipt of the message by the audience? These are some of the broader issues that arise when considering public speaking events. This handbook is intended to provide faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students with a starting point in developing (for the neophyte) and assessing (for the more experienced) their public speaking skills by examining what communication is, what aspects of communication the speaker has control over, and what kinds of rhetorical options are available to the speaker for the conveyance of his or her meaning.

The handbook is divided in five parts. *Basic Communication in Teaching* reviews fundamental principles of communication and describes both the verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication relevant to public speaking. *Good Preparation Leads to Good Performance* covers the preparation required for a speaking event including organizing ideas and supporting evidence, and selecting audiovisual aids. *Practice Does Make Perfect* describes practice: how to choose a test audience and assess their

feedback. *The Front Line: The Presentation Itself* gives tips on the actual presentation including what to do just prior to the presentation, answering questions, and coping with unforeseen events. *Class Presentation by Students* describes classroom presentations, offering suggestions for both faculty (for developing a speaking assignment) and students (for performing a speaking assignment).

Public speaking is a learned skill. To speak well requires practice. Find (and make!) opportunities to speak in public. The ability to speak confidently in front of groups is a valuable asset whether you choose to direct your career toward academia, business, or politics. Having sufficient practice in a variety of different speaking situations allows you to confidently approach the more high risk speaking ventures: a job interview, a dissertation defense, or a proposal presentation.

# Foreword

## RHETORIC:

*An art of influencing the soul by words.*

— PLATO, PHAEDRUS

*The faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.*

— ARISTOTLE, THE RHETORIC

*The use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation  
in beings that by nature respond to symbols.*

— KENNETH BURKE, A RHETORIC OF MOTIVES

FOR AS LONG AS PEOPLE HAVE WRITTEN about rhetoric, it has been a subject of both suspicion and admiration. We fear, as Plato did, its power to “make the worse appear the better and the better, worse.” Yet we also recognize its power to, in Eighteenth century terms, arouse the passions, convince the will, and enlighten the understanding.

So, depending on one’s leanings as to the true nature of rhetoric, one may be inclined to embrace or disparage the proposition that teachers are rhetoricians. But rhetoricians we are, for our medium is human communication and our aim is influence. The enterprise of teaching cannot be reduced to the words on the printed page of a textbook or lecture notes. Instead it demands the acting together of knowledgeable scholars and active learners. Perhaps we can take heart that even the most well known critic of rhetoric acknowledged its place and value. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato suggests a legitimate role for rhetoric in relation to knowledge: that of the handmaiden of truth, a necessary means of communicating those truths that have been dialectically secured. After considering several speeches that are shown to be lacking in moral purpose and/or in eloquence, Socrates explains:

“Can it be, then, my friend, that we have insulted the art of making speeches more freely than we should have? Perhaps she may reply, “What in the world is the point of this strange nonsense, gentlemen? Remember that I bring no compulsion to learn the art of speech on anyone who is ignorant of the truth; indeed, if my advice is worth anything, a man



should not resort to me until he has learned the truth. Yet this boast I can make: without me even the man who is thoroughly familiar with the facts will be not a bit nearer to the art of persuasion.” (Phaedrus, 260)

But rhetoric is more than a handmaiden, more than the vehicle by which truths are told. The distinction between “what is said” and “how it is said” is hardly neat, as anyone who has ever been misunderstood will attest. Sometimes the “how” is the “what,” as when the prose inspires a conviction to content or when a nonverbal cue undercuts the speaker’s intended meaning. And so, for all our own learning and study, we teachers are constantly challenged also to find the rhetorical means to make active in the minds of our students the information and ideas that we profess. This is not a merely matter of find the “right” words or the “correct” organizational pattern, for the right words one semester will be wrong the next and the clearest organization in one class opaque in another. Rather it requires a constant awareness that the rhetorical tools of teaching comprise strategies that help us direct (but unfortunately do not control) the meanings and understandings that learners take from our classes.

Pat Hamm’s handbook introduces the novice teacher and reminds the expert of some key areas of rhetorical choice. If one thinks of teaching as an attempt to influence (in the broadest sense of the term, including the production of knowledge among listeners), then the choices we make about what to say (e.g. how ideas are supported and developed) and how to say it (the dozens of selections of language, structure, nonverbal cues, delivery styles, and so forth) become means of influence, strategies that we can manipulate in an attempt to achieve our teaching goals. While our disciplines ground the content of our teaching, the art of rhetoric offers the tools that activate the knowledge of our disciplines in the minds of teacher and learner. For the beginning teacher, this handbook contains dozens of practical suggestions that may initiate a long term investigation of the complex relationship between communication and teaching. For the experienced teacher, reconsideration of central principles and ideas is often generative, producing applications appropriate to the ever-changing of the classroom and laboratory.

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# Basic Communication in Teaching

## Introduction

**A**LTHOUGH THE THOUGHT OF SPEAKING before an audience fills many with feelings of dread, a public speaking opportunity, if well-planned and practiced, can be a memorable and pleasurable event for both the speaker and the audience. The purpose of communication is to transmit a message about our experiences or perceptions and to express our point of view about those experiences and perceptions. A speaker attempts to aid the audience in understanding the meaning of the message through the use of verbal and nonverbal communication. Language and words are symbolic – they represent ideas and things – and are the verbal tools the speaker uses to convey the true message – the meaning of the words – to the audience. The speaker also uses nonverbal tools – attitude, actions, and appearance – to share the meaning with the audience. An inspired presentation leaves the audience imbued with a real understanding of the meaning of the speaker’s message, not merely superficial comprehension of the words used.

## The Fundamentals of Communication

Communication is a complex process, but a communication system is often categorized into six main components. The six components and their public speaking analogs are:

Transmitter	Speaker
Channels	Senses: speech, hearing, seeing, etc.
Message	Speaker’s topic
Receiver	Audience
Noise	Internal and external factors that affect message reception by audience: e.g., daydreaming, traffic noise, etc.
Feedback	Audience reaction

Of the six components listed, the speaker has immediate control over only three: self, the methods of communication chosen (visual, auditory, etc.), and the message itself. The speaker can influence, but not control, the last three components: the audience, distractions, and audience response. It is the speaker's role to focus attention on the audience to enhance the probability of the receipt of the message. This is done by selecting the type of communication pertinent to the message, establishing a point-of-view, and communicating its meaning to the audience.

To be effective, the speaker must consciously choose not only the subject matter of the presentation, but the personal impression being made and the rhetorical tools being used. The speaker must assess his or her audience and decide how best to reach them both verbally and nonverbally.

## **Rhetorical Choices**

### **TALK THE TALK: VERBAL COMMUNICATION**

Although in this section, verbal communication has been split into two major categories, persuasive and informative, in truth, all presentations have a persuasive aspect. A presentation involves motivating listeners to accept a new idea, alter an existing opinion, or act on a given premise (Rafe, 1990). This is true whether the presentation is describing a recent scientific advance or a political agenda. Therefore, in both persuasive and informative speech, the speaker is asking the audience to do something – whether it be accepting a scientific fact or addressing a social issue.

#### *Persuasive Speech*

“Persuasion is a communicative process of altering the beliefs, attitudes, intentions, or behavior of another by the conscious and unconscious use of words and nonverbal messages.” (Ilardo, 1981)

Persuasive speech is used to influence both individuals and groups to accept a particular position or belief. Persuasive speech requires a clear understanding of the audience and an intense listener focus. According to Flack and Rasberry (1982), using the problem-solution organizational pattern (See Section II, B. 2.a: Using an Organizational Pattern), the speaker must take the audience through five stages of understanding in a persuasive speech: 1) awareness of the problem, 2) understanding the problem, 3) understanding the proposed solution, 4) visualization of the

effects of the proposed solution, and 5) understanding how they, the audience, must act. The awareness stage of the persuasive speech is an introduction to the nature of the problem or situation. Audience understanding of the problem requires a concise problem statement from the speaker's point of view. It is important at this stage to show the relevancy of the problem to the audience: how the problem can or is affecting the audience. The speaker then describes the proposed solution or solutions to the problem and guides the audience into imagining how the proposed solution will be beneficial to them. Finally, the speaker enlists the audience's aid in implementing the proposed solution by indicating what actions, individually and collectively, must be taken.

### *Informative Speech*

"First you tell them what you're going to tell them. Then you tell them. Then you tell them what you told them." (Rafe, 1990)

Informative speech is the workhorse of academia and business. The goal of informative speech is to transmit information of a factual nature: the syntax of a foreign language, the physiology of the kidney, or the sales record of a company. The topics of informative speech can often be organized by chronological or system approaches and therefore may be more easily developed than persuasive arguments. However, informative speech is often viewed as dry or boring; therefore, a speaker must be creative in using multi-sense learning techniques to maintain audience interest and engender curiosity.

### **WALK THE WALK: NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION**

Contrary to intuition, the brunt of the impact of a speaker's presentation is through nonverbal communication; it has been estimated that the meaning received by the audience is derived from approximately  $\frac{1}{3}$  verbal reception and  $\frac{2}{3}$  nonverbal reception. When the verbal and nonverbal messages are contradictory, most people will believe the nonverbal message they are receiving, not the verbal one. Hence, the nonverbal messages, conscious or unconscious, that are being sent by the speaker through appearance, attitude, gesture, and dress, are crucial to the communication of ideas. In addition, the speaker's ability to read the audience and change speaking strategies accordingly will also impact the effectiveness of the transmission of the message.

### *Looks Can Be Deceiving: Appearance*

The nature of your speaking environment often dictates how you will appear. For instance, if you were to speak at a formal dinner, it would be assumed that you would appear in formal dress: to do otherwise, may cause the audience to be affronted or, at least, confused. Some things to consider about your appearance:

- Plan how you will appear. Think carefully about what message your appearance and attire will convey to your audience: will your appearance enhance the transmission of your ideas or distract the audience from your message?
- You are the speaker: you need to be seen. Evaluate anything that might make you “invisible.” For instance, if your long hair falls over your face when you are switching overheads (you will note this during your practice sessions), consider tying it back. People will be able to see your face, and you will not be distracted by having to push your hair out of your face.
- Posture is important in conveying an assured presence: stand up straight, feet approximately shoulder width apart, weight evenly distributed on both feet, and hands relaxed at your sides. Avoid slumping to one side by resting on one leg; it may seem comfortable, but it looks sloppy.

### *Challenges: Stage Fright and Other Hurdles*

Everyone gets stage fright. Some people might call it by a different name – anticipatory excitement, perhaps – but everyone feels excited and keyed up before a performance. Use these feelings to your advantage – instead of being frightened that you might make a poor impression, be excited because you have a forum to present your ideas, you have prepared well, and you wish to present well – these are all good things!

Remember, too, that your audience both wants and expects you to succeed. Few people go to a presentation hoping to have a bad time. The audience is attending your presentation with the expectation of being informed about a topic by a knowledgeable, enthusiastic speaker – YOU!

### *1. Making Friends with the Audience*

When you begin to speak, you have entered into a relationship with your audience, and your calm demeanor helps them in a number of ways:

- A calm and confident attitude puts the audience at ease. A relaxed audience is usually more attentive and open to new ideas.
- Extending courtesy (e.g., thanking the audience for the opportunity to speak, thanking the moderator for an introduction, tactfully handling interruptions, etc.) shows an awareness of others and establishes the speaker as a caring person.
- Although not applicable with all topics, a cheerful and humorous attitude engages the audience and gives the audience a sense of accessibility to the speaker.

### *2. Making Disasters Work for You*

Understanding the importance of having a calm attitude and having a calm attitude are two different things, however. How can you achieve a calm attitude when your knees are knocking and your palms are sweating? Act confident, even if you don't feel confident. Here are some ideas:

- Assume a power stance: feet shoulder width apart, weight evenly distributed.
- Breathe evenly from your stomach at a normal rate and depth.
- If your hands are shaking badly and you can avoid manipulating objects until the shakiness subsides, do so. If not, focus on your topic and not on your hands – eventually the tremors will stop.
- If you really feel you are losing control, drop something – drop the pointer, for instance. As you are bending down to retrieve it, collect your thoughts, center yourself on your topic, remember why you are there. As you stand back up, smile and make a joke – “That was a refreshing break!” and continue.
- Have a sense of humor. The worst that can happen is that you do a poor job presenting your material or look extremely nervous doing it. Most people are empathetic to a nervous speaker, and if they are not, use the episode as an opportunity to build your tolerance for less than perfect performances and as learning experience.

- Practice, practice, practice prior to your presentation. Your best tool for combating nervousness is knowing your material.

### *Using Your Voice Effectively to Reach Your Audience*

Your vocal quality and body language are key elements in presenting your message. Speak at a normal, conversational rate, and don't be concerned about using your normal hand gestures. Since you are attempting to communicate with a larger number of people than you would in a simple conversation, you will have to enhance your normal speech: use more volume, more vocal variety, and more emphasis. As you get more experienced, you may be willing to try more theatrical, flamboyant uses of voice and gesture.

- Speak from the diaphragm and not from the throat. Your voice will carry better, and you are less likely to suffer from a quavering voice.
- Voice modulation is important. Avoid speaking in a monotone; use your normal conversational inflection.
- Speak at moderate speed, and enunciate clearly.
- Make sure you know the correct pronunciation of all terms and proper names in your presentation.
- Using hand gestures for emphasis during your talk can be very effective as long as they are not too wild or over-practiced. Ask for opinions from your test audience (see "Practice Does Make Perfect," page 29).
- It is perfectly acceptable to pause at points during your presentation; you do not have to speak continuously. Do not let brief silences rattle you. Determine appropriate "stopping points," and build pauses into the body of the presentation. Appropriately placed pauses can be quite dramatic and effective in getting the audience's attention.
- Watch for those infamous verbal pause fillers: "you know," "um," "well," and "okay?" If you use these words, you will have to train yourself to refrain from using them by being hyper-attentive to them for a few presentations; with practice, you will stop using them. You can also solicit help on breaking these habits from friends.



- Avoid the use of slang, indeterminate language, and colloquialisms in presentations. The exception to this is the “humorous aside”; however, make sure that your audience has a sense of humor before you try this.
- Do not read your presentation. Make a commitment to extemporaneous delivery. You can make your points more efficiently and effectively by speaking directly to your audience and eliciting their natural empathy.

### **How Are You Doing? Using Audience Feedback**

In order to get and use feedback from the audience, you have to survey the members of the audience as you are speaking. It is a natural tendency, especially when you are nervous, to focus on one or two audience members as you are speaking – especially if those one or two are nodding their heads in agreement. However, as the speaker, it is usually your intent to reach as many members of the audience with your message as possible. In order to do this, you must look at various members of the audience in turn and steel yourself for the possibility of seeing looks of boredom or hostility.

- Look for obvious body language cues from the audience. Do they look relaxed and attentive? Are they in open postures (arms open, hands relaxed) or closed postures (arms crossed, fists clenched)? Are they watching you or looking out the window? Are they eating lunch, reading the newspaper, or even sleeping?
- Do they appear confused? Often audience members will start to quietly discuss a point with each other if they are confused, will put their hand to their mouth, or tentatively raise their hands. If you observe these situations, feel free to stop and ask, “Is there a point that you would like me to explain further?”
- If the nonverbal cues you are receiving from the audience indicate to you that you are not getting your message across, you’ll have to be creative and modify your behavior to elicit positive audience response. For instance, you might change the modulation of your voice, use a different argument or piece of evidence to support your

premise, use more open-handed gestures, or ask a question, i.e. change the format.

- Do not take negative audience responses too personally, especially if only one or two people are eliciting them. Their apparent discomfort may have nothing to do with your presentation.

If an audience is responding negatively to your presentation, look at it as an opportunity to try new speaking ploys to get the presentation back on track or as an opportunity to reassess your speaking techniques.

# Good Preparation Leads to Good Performance

## **Setting Priorities: Choosing the Main Ideas**

**A** PRESENTATION CAN BE CONSIDERED a form of formalized conversation. In order for you to get your point across to your audience, you must have a clear picture of the nature of your audience and its relationship to your topic. To transmit your message efficiently, you must have a listener or audience focus. What is the audience's attitude toward the topic? What is the relevancy of this topic to the audience? What is the state of audience's current knowledge of the topic? Is the audience homogeneous or heterogeneous in terms of attitude and knowledge, and how will this impact the receipt of your message? Is there only one opportunity to speak in front of this audience or will there be multiple opportunities? These are the types of questions you must ask yourself when you are organizing and developing your talk.

The essence of organizing an idea is actually very simple:

- Make a point.
- Explain it.
- Support it.
- Conclude it.

Organizing a presentation then becomes a matter of developing connections between the ideas that you have already organized.

## Organizing the Main Ideas into a Coherent Presentation

In order for you to speak effectively, it is imperative that you know your topic well or can know it well by the time the presentation is to take place. Often the subject matter is dictated by the nature of your discipline or by a syllabus. As the speaker, your role is:

1. to clarify the purpose, goal, or thesis of your talk, and
2. to make rhetorical choices that maximize the communication of your purpose, goal, or thesis to your audience.

The most effective way to ensure that you know your topic well is by developing a thesis statement: a single simple statement that clearly and concisely states what you wish to accomplish with your presentation (Cooper, 1991). Developing a thesis statement necessarily involves a narrowing of the focus of your original subject area, and this narrowing of focus should always be performed with your goals for the presentation and your knowledge of the audience in mind.

1. *Clarify the purpose, goal, or thesis of your talk.*
  - a) Have the focus of your talk so clear that you can recite it.
  - b) Know the point of your talk: what's the big picture?
  - c) Why should the audience be interested in this topic?
  - d) Limit yourself to relatively few main ideas (two to five).
  - e) Fully develop these few main points.
2. *Make rhetorical choices that maximize the communication of your purpose, goal, or thesis to your audience.*
  - a) Use an organizational pattern that helps the audience follow and predict where you are headed with your topic.

Develop an outline based on your thesis statement. A number of different types of outlines can be used: single word, key phrase, or complete sentence. When you are developing your outline, you should think about the type of organizational pattern most effective for your presentation. Common organizational patterns

that are often used include (Flacks and Rasberry, 1981; Cooper, 1991; Buzan, 1996):

- Causal: Enumerating cause and effect relationships.
  - Chronological: Sequential ordering of material.
  - Mind map: Using the central point of the talk as the origin in the development of a radiant, associative pattern of ideas (see Buzan, 1996).
  - Pro and con: Arguing the positive and negative aspects of an issue or problem.
  - Problem-solution: Posing a problem and offering a solution.
  - Procedural: Providing a logical ordering of the steps required to accomplish some task.
  - Spatial: Ordering material to describe the physical arrangement or relationship of areas, places, or things.
  - System: Describing the relationship of interacting, interrelating, or interdependent parts of a collective whole.
  - Topical: Using the topic itself to provide the organizational structure.
- b) Use a wide variety of supplemental material to develop your ideas.
- c) If your topic is complicated, consider how you can logically divide the talk into sections (or “chunks”) consisting of relatively few points. Pay particular attention to how you are going to establish links between sections to preserve the continuity of the talk as a whole.
- d) Develop an introduction that sparks the audience’s curiosity and gives them a reason to listen – why is this topic important to them?
- e) Develop a conclusion that summarizes the main points that you have presented.

Consider how the conclusion can be related back to the introduction – bring the audience full circle.

## Supporting Evidence

Both facts and opinions are used to support arguments; the selection of the mix between fact and opinion depends on what your intent is. Research has indicated that facts alone will not alter an audience's opinions (Ilardo, 1982); therefore, the evidence used to support a particular argument must be selected with the intended audience's current informational and belief state in mind. Evidence that is consistent with the audience's current beliefs is more likely to be accepted, particularly if the sources of that evidence are also acceptable to the audience (Ilardo, 1982). The evidence selected must also be understandable to the audience: use of extremely complicated or technical evidence can bore or even anger an audience. If the use of complicated evidence is necessary, the evidence must be explained carefully, and its relevance to your arguments clearly defined.

The major types of supporting evidence commonly used include (Flacks and Rasberry, 1981; Cooper, 1991):

- Analogies: Statements that infer a similarity between two concepts or things, usually not obviously viewed as related.
- Anecdotes: Short descriptions or narratives used for dramatic impact.
- Comparisons: Statements showing how two things relate to one another.
- Contrasts: Statements showing how two things differ from one another.
- Definitions: Statements giving the meaning of a word.
- ♦ Examples/Illustrations: Detailed narratives used to clarify general ideas.
- Statistics: Quantifications used to clarify a point, to substantiate a point, or to make an idea concrete.
- Testimony: Statements made by someone other than the speaker.

Some considerations when selecting supporting evidence are as follows. When using analogies, comparisons, and contrasts, you have to make sure the audience is familiar with at least one of the phenomena you are describing or your point will be lost. Definitions must be clear

and concise and stated in a language easily understandable to the audience. Examples and illustrations must be carefully selected to support your points; ambiguity or illogic in your examples will hinder their usefulness. Statistics are often viewed as strong supporting evidence, but if they are overused, they can make a presentation seem boring to the audience. Testimony must be carefully selected with the audience in mind: if the audience doubts the credibility, veracity, or verifiability of the testimony, its effectiveness will be undermined.

### **Introductions and Conclusions**

It may seem odd to place introductions and conclusions at the end of the sections on topic development, but it is after your topic is fully developed that you can see most clearly what the best way to introduce the topic is, as well as the best way to conclude it. Once you have developed your thesis statement, outlined your topic using a suitable organizational pattern, and selected your evidence, you can take a hard look at the structure of your introduction and conclusion. Your introduction should be developed to accomplish three things: establish a relationship between you and your audience, excite audience interest in your topic, and preview what you will be discussing in your presentation (Cooper, 1991). You may use any type of introduction that is appropriate to your audience: use quotations, rhetorical questions, or humor. Your conclusion should accomplish two things: summarize the major points covered in the body of the presentation (post-organizing) and provide a sense of closure (Cooper, 1991). One effective method for providing a sense of closure is by having the conclusion refer back to the introduction.

### **Audiovisual Aids: Selection and Use**

Audiovisual aids are just that – aids – they should be selected to enhance the transmission of your message, not serve as either a substitute for you, the speaker, or as a smoke screen for a poorly planned presentation.

#### *Weighing the Merits of Audiovisual Aids*

The benefits of carefully selected and prepared audiovisual aids are many:

- 1) they allow multi-sense learning to take place,

- 2) they can be used to introduce new topics and summarize ideas, and
- 3) they can be used to clarify complex or multifaceted ideas.

The drawbacks of audiovisual aids may not be as obvious:

- 1) they can be boring and overused,
- 2) they can be difficult to coordinate into a presentation both temporally and technically,
- 3) they can be time-consuming to construct, and
- 4) they can give the speaker a false sense of mastery of his/her topic

#### *Choosing the Audiovisual Aid That Will Enhance Your Topic*

Prior to selecting an audiovisual aid, the speaker should consider the following questions:

- 1) How will this aid enhance and support the points I intend to make in my presentation?
- 2) How much preparation time is required for this technique?
- 3) Is the necessary equipment available at the site? How do I make arrangements to have the equipment in place?

#### *Making Sure That the Selected Audiovisual Aid Will Convey the Topic Effectively.*

Once you've decided on an audiovisual technique, you should:

- 1) Make sure all visual aids are readable and accurate.
- 2) Practice with your visual aids until your speech runs smoothly with the visual aids incorporated.
- 3) Develop a contingency plan in the event the worst happens, i.e. an equipment malfunction occurs.
- 4) Present only one main idea per overhead, slide, or flip chart.
- 5) Use strong and carefully thought out transitions when using audiovisual aids.



## **BOARDWORK**

Effective use of a chalkboard or whiteboard is not an easy task when speaking to an audience for an number of reasons. You must not only remember what you are about to say, you must spell correctly, write clearly, and draw organized visual aids – all while turned away from your audience, thereby limiting your sense of audience feedback. For these reasons, boardwork must be carefully planned in advance.

- Plan ahead on how you will use the space on the blackboard. Use large, dark letters. Use the board from left to right. Underline or box items for emphasis as necessary.
- Use large, dark block lettering in preference to cursive writing.
- Use key words and phrases instead of complete sentences.
- Consider using colored chalk for clarity and emphasis.
- Avoid writing on the lower  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the board; usually people at the back will not be able to see what you have written because other people's heads will be in the way.
- Even if your talk is centered around overheads, be prepared to use the board. Often, boardwork is necessary during the question and answer period.
- If you need to erase, use an eraser, not your hand. You will look more in control, and you do not run the risk of ending up with chalk all over your clothes.

## **FLIP CHARTS**

Flip charts are used more frequently in business settings than in academia, but they are an attractive alternative to boardwork in that they can be prepared in advance, are inexpensive, can be reused, and do not involve as much disruption of speaker-audience interaction as boardwork.

- Put only one main idea per chart.
- Try to put no more than 5 to 7 lines per chart.
- Use large block letters; consider the use of color for emphasis or organization.

- If necessary, you can lightly pencil in notes to yourself on the charts; however, do not obviously read these during your presentation – it looks unprofessional.
- Consider attaching tabs for easier turning of the chart pages.
- Show charts only when they apply; the audience should be paying attention to you, not reading ahead on the next chart.
- Turn and talk to the chart when referring to it; increase the volume of your voice and watch your diction at any point that you are turned away from the audience.
- Watch where you are standing; make sure you are not obstructing the audience's view of the chart. Also, make sure the chart is placed high enough on its easel or stand so that persons in the back of the room have a clear view.

#### **OVERHEADS**

Overheads are a frequently used audiovisual aid in both academia and industry. They are easy to prepare, inexpensive, and reusable. If you plan to discuss a topic to more than one audience, consider placing your most often used overheads in cardboard frames to protect them during repeated use.

- Remember that your presentation is an oral presentation not a written one. Your overheads should contain succinct phrases containing the key points that you want your audience to understand. Do not read your overheads to the audience. Your job is to verbally elaborate and defend the point of view that you are positing. Visually, you want your overheads to be easy to read and understand. Do not put too much information on each one.
- To estimate the number of overheads required for a talk, use the rule-of-thumb of 2–3 minutes per overhead, excluding the title overhead. For example, 10–15 overheads will be required for a 30-minute talk.
- Watch your margins when preparing overheads. Parts of the overhead may be cut off if the projector area is too small.
- Never put anything on an overhead that you are unwilling or unable to discuss. In the same vein, never put up an overhead, look

at it, and say, “I’m not going to discuss this.” If you are not going to talk about it, do not put it up!

- If you are considering using color, think carefully about why you are using it: are you color-coding items to make them more understandable to the audience or do you just think the colors look nice? There is a difference.
- Consider using “road-map” overheads, i.e. an overhead at the beginning of the talk that summarizes what topics will be covered and in what order. In the same vein, if your talk is divided into sections, consider using summary overheads that review the main points of each section.
- Use a final summary overhead that details the conclusions that you have drawn from your work.
- Do not hover by the projector; move and act naturally.
- Face the audience and speak directly to them. If you want to point to something on the overhead, use a pen, pencil, or other pointed object and point to the overhead, not to the screen.
- When not referring to an overhead, turn the projector off. This keeps the audience focused on you and removes the distraction of a bright, white blank screen.
- Try writing your notes on the paper photocopy of your overheads. In this way, your notes come up with each overhead.
- Be sure to credit your sources on your overheads; the audience should be able to easily distinguish between your work and that of others.
- After you have made your main overheads, make additional overheads in anticipation of any points that you feel may need further explanation; you will look well-prepared if questions arise, and you will feel more confident.
- If presenting your research or the work of a team effort, do not forget your etiquette overhead: thanks to your colleagues, advisor, research collaborators, post-doctoral students, other graduate students, research funding agencies, etc.

## **SLIDES**

Slides are an attractive alternative for presentations that you plan to repeat for multiple audiences or for forums where slide presentations are expected, e.g. technical conferences, fine art presentations, or business presentations. Slides are more expensive financially and temporally to produce so you should allow yourself plenty of development time if you chose this audiovisual option.

- Keep in mind that the audience will be unable to use visual cues to aid in their auditory understanding when you are speaking in a darkened room; therefore, speak about twice as loudly as you normally would when giving a presentation.
- If you are using a pointer, hold it in the hand that is closest to the screen: in this way, when you point to the screen, you will be facing the audience and will not have to reach across your body to point at something.
- Take your time and describe each image or slide slowly. This is especially important when slides are being used in a classroom situation, and students are attempting to take notes.
- Decide how many images you can reasonably explain in the time period allotted, assuming that you will need approximately 3 minutes per slide or image for descriptive purposes.
- If the slide is of a physical object, give the audience an idea of the size of the actual object they are viewing.
- Develop a slide list for your presentation, both for yourself, and if the presentation is for the classroom, as a study aid for the students.

## **COMPUTER GRAPHICS**

Many graphics programs are available for the production of overheads and slides. Your departmental computer coordinator or the Computer Information Services (CIS) can help you decide on an application and tell you whether it is currently supported by the CIS.

## USING A MICROPHONE

Using a microphone may seem uncomfortable for you the first few times that you use one: everyone remembers seeing a presentation in which the microphone failed to work, began squawking loudly, or continued to droop at the lectern like a wilted flower no matter how many times the frustrated speaker attempted to readjust it. Here are some tips on microphone use adapted from Rafe (1990):

- If you are using a clip-on microphone, it should be placed about midway on your breastbone. Rafe (1990) recommends using the hand-span technique: while looking straight ahead, put your thumb on your chin, then spread your fingers downward toward your feet. Place the microphone at the tip of your little finger.
- If you are using a microphone attached to a podium, check for the proper placement of the microphone prior to your presentation. Make sure that you know how to adjust it in the event that you must follow a speaker who has adjusted it to suit his/her needs.
- Check the audio level prior to your presentation. Introduce yourself or perform part of your introduction so you can hear how your voice is going to sound when you are delivering your talk.
- If the microphone begins screeching loudly, check to make sure that you are not standing in front of a speaker and causing feedback. If you or the technician (if available) cannot correct the problem quickly, turn the system off, and, if practical, ask the audience to move closer and continue your presentation.
- If the microphone goes dead, check to see if it was accidentally turned off or unplugged. Again, if no solution can be found quickly, continue without the microphone if practical.

## **DISCIPLINE SPECIFIC ISSUES**

Although there are common elements to presentations across disciplines, be aware that there may be presentation issues specific to your discipline. For instance, here are some recommendations for overheads that are specific to chemistry:

- Rule-of-thumb for chemical structures: do not put more than four chemical structures on an overhead. If a compound is particularly complex, it may require its own overhead.
- It is usually preferable to redraw a chemical structure (using ChemDraw for example) than to photocopy structures out of the literature and hope they enlarge well.
- If you are presenting a graph or figure from your work, do not assume that you can photocopy it and get a good overhead. Pay particular attention to the labeling of axes and points. You may have to modify your original figure with much larger fonts in order for the labels to be readable at the back of the room.

Ask an experienced presenter in your field for advice if you have any questions about what is usual presentation practice in your discipline.

# Practice Does Make Perfect (or at least better)

**P**RACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE! Public speaking can only be learned through direct experience; no amount of reading about it will be as effective in honing your skills as actually doing it. During your initial practice sessions, you may want to work from a fully developed written text of your talk until you are comfortable with the feel of the presentation. Having the full text of your talk written out also has the advantage of giving you a permanent record of your talk.

Once you are satisfied with the flow of your presentation, be prepared, however, to commit to extemporaneous delivery. Use 4 by 6 inch index cards to write key words and notes to yourself and then practice giving your talk using different phrasings to describe the meaning of your message – it is the meaning, not the words, that you are trying to transmit to the audience.

## **Choosing Your Test Audience**

There are two types of test audiences that you can select for your practice sessions, and both types have their merits. A knowledgeable test audience would be one or more persons who share your level of understanding of the topic and can make comments on the factual portion of your talk. This type of audience is very important in helping you determine the completeness and effectiveness of your coverage of a topic; however, sometimes a knowledgeable audience becomes so immersed in your topic that they are unable to give you feedback on the mechanics of your speaking skills. A naive test audience is one comprised of non-experts in your field who can focus on how you present the material: both in terms of its logical flow and your presentation skills. If possible, a mix of both types of audience participants should be arranged for your practice sessions.

- Practice in front of at least one person from your discipline (more is better) and if possible, a non-expert. Get feedback on both the organization of the material and your delivery. Listen carefully and implement changes as necessary.
- The purpose of your practice talks is to give you ample opportunity to get the kinks out of your presentation. Make them as formal as possible; that is, actually present your talk – do not say: “Well, first I’m going to say this and then I’ll put up this overhead.” Do it, do not describe it.
- Use your practice session to brainstorm about the type of questions that are likely to be asked about your topic. Use your test audience to evaluate where the murky areas in your presentation are.
- If possible, practice in the room that you will actually be speaking in. Check your overheads and make sure that they are readable from the back of the room.
- When you are satisfied with the content and organization of your talk, practice, practice, practice.

### **Evaluating Feedback**

Some members of your test audiences may be inexperienced in giving feedback. Some suggestions that you might like to share with them prior to their evaluation of your presentation are as follows:

1. *“Own” your messages.*

State your reactions with “I” rather than “you” statements that generalize for all listeners. Audience reactions vary. By owning your own reactions, you allow for the possibility of different responses. (You might invite other reactions as well).

Examples: “I appreciated the way you connected your speech to last week’s class discussion.” “I was confused when you said . . . because . . . .”



2. *Be specific and concrete.*

While it might be nice to know that someone liked my introduction, it doesn't tell me very much. Instead, one could say, for example, "I liked the concrete illustrations of the theory X." or "I liked the way you included your own background and interest in the introduction."

3. *Focus on behaviors, not on personality characteristics and judgments.*

For example, say "I would have liked more eye contact" rather than "It's clear you're really not interested in us since you never look at us."

Also, limit comments to behaviors that are changeable. Distracting gestures can be brought under control. Calling attention to a stutter, for example, is probably not helpful in a public setting.

4. *Distinguish between observations, inferences, and judgments.*

All of these have some role in evaluation but they are quite different.

- Observations have to do with what we see and hear; inferences and conclusions we reach based on those observations and judgments and/or evaluative response.
- Listeners observe differently, and, more important, draw different inferences and judgments from what they see and hear. Therefore, start by reporting your observations and then explain what you inferred from them.

Speakers can hear a great deal of feedback on observations. Inferences and judgments are more "hearable" when the observations they are based on are clear observations.

5. *Balance positive and negative comments.*

Try to emphasize the positive things which the presenter might work on constructively in the future.

When listening to feedback on your presentation, do not be overly sensitive to either the wording or the actual comments; some people may feel uncomfortable giving criticism and may not phrase their comments well. Try to understand what the test audience member is trying to say about their understanding of the message you were trying to transmit. You may be surprised – what you felt was a perfectly logical argument may have been lost on your audience! Ask questions about where the audience felt they started to lose your message. Determine whether your transitions were effective.

Although your test audience's feedback is invaluable, remember this is your presentation. Do not be intimidated into using an approach that is uncomfortable for you or inconsistent with your goals based on feedback from your test audience.

# The Front Line: The Presentation Itself

## **Pre-Presentation Check**

**T**O FEEL COMFORTABLE prior to your presentation, it is a good idea to minimize any surprises. Therefore, get to the room in which you are presenting about one half hour early and check the following items:

- Check the audience seating arrangement. If it is unacceptable to you, modify it to suit your needs.
- Check the podium or stage. Decide how you are going to arrange your workspace to make your talk run smoothly.
- Make sure all audiovisual equipment necessary is in place and working correctly. Sound check microphones.
- If you plan to use the chalkboard at any point, make sure chalk and erasers are available.

## **The Presentation**

All your practice and preparation is about to pay off! If you must introduce yourself, have a brief description of yourself, your credentials, and your interest in the topic ready. If you are being introduced by another, make sure he/she has all the pertinent information necessary to make an effective introduction.

- Always remember that it is YOUR presentation. You have worked hard to organize your material so that the audience can benefit from your expertise on a particular topic. Your presentation is the culmination of a lot of effort on your part: revel in the opportunity to communicate your ideas!
- When you are introduced, smile confidently, welcome the audience to your talk, take a deep breath, and start!

## Answering Questions

When preparing for your presentation, prepare for the question and answer period at the same time. When thinking about the question and answer period, you may wish to evaluate weak points in your arguments, examine subtle points that may require further explanation, or consider related material that may come up during the question and answer period. Here are some tips for handling questions:

- Embrace the notion that people are asking questions because they are curious about your topic and really want to learn something – you will feel more relaxed if you are in “discussing” mode rather than “questioned-victim” mode.
- When a question is asked, repeat the question for the entire audience. This serves a number of purposes: all audience members are made aware of what issue is about to be discussed, you are made sure that you have heard the question correctly, and you are given an opportunity to start thinking of an answer.
- It is perfectly acceptable to remain silent as you formulate the answer to a question.
- If you do not understand a question, ask a question about the question or ask the questioner to rephrase question.
- If you do not know the answer to a question and can offer no educated guesses, say so (but do not apologize). If you offer to get the requested information for the questioner at a later date, follow through. If you do not know the answer but can offer a methodology for arriving at the answer, by all means do so.
- If a question is asked during your talk that is so far off-topic that it will interrupt the continuity of your presentation to address it, thank the questioner for his/her question and offer to discuss the issue with him/her after your talk.
- Keep your cool; answer questions in a calm, conversational manner even if you feel a questioner is becoming hostile or confrontational. Emphasize the positive and keep your credibility. Address the question, not the questioner (Rafe, 1990).

## Disasters

“I was presenting my first paper before the Division of Colloid and Surface Chemistry of the American Chemical Society in Washington, D.C. As I was speaking, a gentleman calmly came on stage, walked up to the podium, picked it up, and moved it to the other side of the stage. I stood there, podiumless, and stared at the audience. I said, “Have podium, will travel.” The audience roared. I found out later that the podium was blocking a fire exit and that the fire marshal had insisted that the hotel staff move it immediately . . . even though I was in the middle of my presentation!” – Pat Hamm

Even the best planned presentation can go awry – sometimes because of external events such as equipment failures, last minute room changes, or even fire marshals, and sometimes because of internal events such as forgetting your place, misspeaking, making an error, or even illness. When disaster strikes, what do you do? You use Plan B.

The key for handling disasters is to have a Plan B. For instance, bearing in mind that equipment failures can occur, decide in advance how you would cope with this situation. Remember, audiovisual aids are used to enhance your presentation, but they are not equivalent to your presentation. For instance, if the overhead projector failed to function, could you still present using a blackboard? Would any material have to be left out? Is it impossible for you to present your material without your audiovisual equipment? If so, then the pre-presentation equipment check is especially crucial, and it would be beneficial to you to know the location of any spare equipment (projectors, bulbs, etc.) at your presentation site.

What about mistakes that you make during your presentation? What do you do if you suddenly find you have lost your place? One method of recovery is to repeat your last sentence, using slightly different phrasing if you prefer, as you briefly glance at your notes or overhead to reorient yourself. Often this is enough to jog your memory. What if you misspeak during your presentation? If you misspeak and it is funny and the audience laughs, laugh, too, then correct your statement and continue.

Often, the best Plan B is to have a sense of humor. Maintain your positive demeanor and continue as best you can under the circumstances.

## **Getting Feedback from the Audience**

During your practice sessions, you received feedback from the test audience that you selected. You may have modified your presentation based on their comments or you may have decided to concentrate on a new speaking technique during your presentation – for instance, the effective use of pauses. You would like and need feedback on the actual presentation. You can get two types of feedback on your actual presentation: you can arrange with someone prior to the presentation to give you feedback, telling them specifically what you would like them to look for, or you can approach persons from the audience after your presentation and get impromptu feedback from them. Remember, if you select someone from the audience that does not know you or your topic well, they may feel uncomfortable making comments on your presentation. You will have to think carefully about what it is you would like to know and how you will phrase your questions to get the information you need.

If you would like feedback on your presentation from trained observers, the Sheridan Center offers individual teaching consultations (ITCs). Two trained observers will come to your presentation or class, observe, and write a report with suggestions for improving your presentation skills. If you wish, your presentation may be videotaped. All reports and videotapes are confidential and for your benefit only.

As a last step, always assess your own performance. You must develop your own ability to size up your audience, recognize their responses, and modify your speaking style accordingly.

# Class Presentations by Students

## **Suggestions for Faculty**

Class presentations are an opportunity for students to demonstrate their understanding of a topic and to explain it to an audience. A carefully thought out speaking assignment with cogent feedback is a valuable experience for students and expands their repertoire of communication skills. If you decide to include a speaking assignment in your course, it is best to integrate it into the course syllabus. Optional speaking assignments are often avoided by students, particularly if they do not feel they have the speaking skills necessary to perform the assignment effectively. When preparing a speaking assignment for students, here are some things to think about:

- What is the purpose of the assignment?
- What are your own goals and objectives for this assignment?
- How will you assess whether your goals and objectives have been met?
- How does this speaking assignment fit in your overall course goals?
- How will you manage the speaking assignment logistically? How will you schedule the assignment? How much time will you allot per student?
- How will you prepare the students so their presentations will be successful? In particular, how will you prepare students who have little public speaking experience or who are anxious when speaking in public?
- How will you evaluate the speaking assignment? How will you communicate your evaluation to your students?
- Will students be allowed to critique each others' presentations? What ground rules will you set for student-student evaluation?

You will probably wish to develop your own guidelines for class presentations; however, the principles outlined in the next section, Suggestions for Students, may be used as a starting point. Copies of “Suggestions for Student Presentations” are available from the Sheridan Center to hand out to students preparing presentations.

### **Suggestions for Students**

Class presentations are usually fairly short (on the order of 10 minutes) so the amount of material presented must be lessened. If a longer class presentation is required for the course (on the order of 15 to 30 minutes), use the techniques and tips described in this manual to develop your presentation.

Here are some suggestions for short class presentations<sup>2</sup>.

Your presentation should incorporate these four basic elements:

1. State your main point clearly.

Limit yourself to one main point and state it clearly and succinctly. The content of the presentation should be chosen to illustrate and support your point.

2. Explain your main point.
3. Support your main point with evidence from other sources.
4. Conclude/restate your main point.

Restatement of your main point helps the audience to reinforce what they have heard and remember it better.

- Practice with others (roommates, friends, etc.).

State your idea in five or six different ways in order to solidify the idea in your mind and get beyond a set phrase, or a single way of expressing your idea.

- Speak, don't read.

Use note cards as cues: do not read your notes. The purpose of a presentation is to give the audience your ideas about a topic, not to read out a mass of unsynthesized data.

- Stay within the time limit.



Practice is critical for staying within the time assigned.

- Do not overload a short presentation with too many extras.

Too many visual aids, overheads, etc. distract from your ability to make your point clearly. Only use visual aids as critical illustrative material to support a specific point. If you use visual aids, you must take time to explain them. Otherwise, use handouts.

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# The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning

**T**HE HARRIET W. SHERIDAN CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING was founded in 1987 to assist faculty and graduate teaching assistants to improve the quality of undergraduate and graduate instruction within the University. Today, the center supports members of the Brown teaching community in building reflective teaching practices which ensure that a diverse student body has the best possible environment for learning. The Brown curriculum promotes the mutually productive relationship between teaching and research among faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students. The center plays a crucial role in facilitating the ongoing development of that relationship. The Sheridan Center further seeks to help prepare graduate teaching assistants for productive professional teaching careers after they leave Brown.

To those ends, the Sheridan Center offers a variety of programs, services and publications. Programs include broad-scale teaching forums, the Sheridan Teaching Seminar lecture series and three Sheridan Center Teaching Certificate programs (I: Building a Reflective Teaching Practice, II: Classroom Tools and III: Professional Development Seminar). Consulting Services provide faculty and graduate students with individual feedback on classroom performance, course revision, presentation/conference paper skills, and grant requirements. Through the agency of faculty and graduate student liaisons to academic departments, the center assists with the design and implementation of seminars on discipline-specific teaching and learning. The center also maintains a resource library of books, articles, journals and videotapes on teaching and learning issues for members of the University teaching community.

The Sheridan Center publications include *The Teaching Exchange*, Handbooks and a web site. *The Teaching Exchange* is a bi-annual forum for the exchange of ideas about teaching across the Brown community. Handbooks include *Teaching at Brown*, *Constructing A Syllabus*, *The Teaching*

*Portfolio*, and *Teaching and Persuasive Communication* and *Teaching to Cognitive Diversity*. The videotape *Effective Teaching for Dyslexic/All College Students* is distributed nationally to facilitate understanding of learning diversity in the classroom. The center's web site offers 24/7 access to information about center activities, on-line editions of all publications, and two unique, interactive, pedagogical workshops. The Sheridan Center also facilitates the exchange of ideas on teaching and learning at Brown between faculty and other individuals and agencies on campus through The Brown Teaching Collaborative.

The Sheridan Center is located at 96 Waterman St., near Thayer St. For information about the Center and resources for teaching at Brown, please contact the Center at: Box 1912; (401) 863-1219; [Sheridan\\_Center@Brown.edu](mailto:Sheridan_Center@Brown.edu); [http://www.brown.edu/sheridan\\_center/](http://www.brown.edu/sheridan_center/)

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PATRICIA HOGAN HAMM holds a Ph.D. in Chemistry from Brown University. Her research is centered on the use of nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy for the study of living systems. Ms. Hamm holds a B.S. in Chemical Engineering, an M.S. in Environmental Engineering, and an M.A. in Chemistry. Prior to returning to school to pursue her Ph.D. in Chemistry, Ms. Hamm worked as an environmental process engineer. Ms. Hamm was one of the two Graduate Fellows at the Sheridan Center from 1995–97. Her involvement with the Center allowed her to pursue her interest in teaching issues, particularly those relating to the teaching of science.

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