

From Dissertation to Presentation: Pointers & Points of View

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The Most Important Element: Audience Centeredness (Or - Is Your Audience Awake or Asleep?)

In all public speaking venues, including academic ones, a single question should be uppermost in your mind: "How can I get *this* audience interested in what I have to say?" Remember what you are up against: Some members of the audience are worried about the speech they have to give after you (or how they did just before you), other members are thinking that they are hungry and wondering which restaurant to choose for dinner. Forgetting that engaging your audience is your most important goal is the pitfall that many conference speakers fall into.

Think about the most dynamic speakers you have heard in academic circles and also recall some of the poorest ones. Of course, the quality of their research (and yours!) is extremely important, but many times brilliant scholars do not make the best presenters.

Why is it so important to engage your audience and speak dynamically?

- Much of your academic reputation will be built on the strength of your research along with **how well** you publically present your ideas to the scholarly community.
- Opportunities to participate in scholarly events (conference panels, keynotes, pre-conferences, etc.) will be offered more frequently to those who are known to be dynamic speakers. (Who wants to invite a dull speaker to be on a program?)
- Interviewing practices at most universities require an oral presentation of your research or a topic of interest. Potential employers may be in any given audience!

Now do I have your attention?

Good speakers are audience-centered. They know the primary purpose of speech-making is not merely to display one's learning or demonstrate one's superiority or blow off steam. Rather, it is to gain a *desired response* from listeners. Your objective is to gain the desired response from *this audience*, in *this* situation. In academia, the objective is usually to disseminate the findings of your research to the scholarly community. Secondly, to invite critique and discussion of your work. The comments that follow are essentially geared around these objectives.

Too Much Information

Many academic presentations suffer from having much too much information. A speech should always be given to achieve a *specific purpose*. The specific purpose is a statement of the *goal* you want the speech to achieve. It is phrased in the following form:

The specific purpose of this speech is to inform the audience of the methodology and results of my research.

This is *why* you are giving the speech - to inform your audience of this topic. The information you present in the speech should always address the specific purpose: Does it help in achieving this goal, or is it irrelevant? Is it padding? Is it presenting information for the sake of presenting it? Determining the specific purpose is a vital stage in the preparation and giving of a speech.

Most of the time when doing a scholarly presentation you have a strict time frame. The amount of time can be anywhere from 5-7 minutes, to 15-20 minutes, or (if you are extraordinarily fortunate) as much as an hour. Your time frame is usually beyond your control and determined by the number of speakers, format, and the length of the program. If there are 5 speakers, plus time for Q &A at the end, in an hour-long program (which is not unusual) you will get 7-10 minutes. Yikes! Now, you have been working on your dissertation (or latest research project) for 5 or 6 years and are really excited (I hope) about your results. How do you condense it into 7-10 minutes? This is my advice.

- Quick intro. Thank the panel organizers.
- Briefly give your topic and why you are interested in it.
- State your research questions or hypotheses.
- Zoom through the lit. review - Surprise! This is not the most interesting part.
- Zip through the methodology - ditto. (Unless you have been invited to speak on a methodology panel.)
- Ah! The results! Spend the bulk of your precious time here. What did you find out? Think about the implications of your results that are interesting to your audience - then tell them about it.
- Conclude quickly with future directions of your research.

Also, I highly recommend bringing a handout with at least your name, affiliation, email address, and a brief abstract. If you are giving a scholarly paper, bringing copies for the audience is always professional, or take business cards of those who are interested in getting a paper by mail.

Audiovisual Aids

Give some thought to whether you want to use audiovisual aids. Make sure that your audiovisuals enhance your presentation, adding visual interest. Many people are using PowerPoint presentations. These can be extremely effective, but these can also be fraught with potential pitfalls.

Overhead slides, which can be crafted from PowerPoint slides are another possibility. They have fewer possible glitches, but are not as sexy. I frequently use video clips when talking about my research into librarian stereotypes, but almost inevitably there is some problem with hardware or software. Whatever mode of audiovisual aid you use, make sure that visuals are large enough when projected that people at the back can see. Be sure to check out the equipment beforehand, and always be prepared with a backup or enough low-tech material (i.e., handwritten notes! Or highlighted copy of your paper), just in case of a technical disaster.

I was at one conference when the power went out and the keynote speaker, Neil Postman, of NYU, gave his speech outside at the bottom of the steps of the building while the audience sat on the steps. Luckily it wasn't too cold or raining. Of course, he is a well-known luddite (no computers) and he loved the opportunity to speak outside without even a microphone. The moral of the story is to make sure that you are prepared for any tech emergency.

Personal Style

There are many different styles in the giving of oral presentations. Some are relaxed, others active. Public speaking does not require a "correct" style. Style is something you develop as you give more and more speeches. Style is a matter of feeling comfortable *and* looking competent and credible. Again, I recommend that you pay attention to the style of speakers you like and to those you find less pleasing. Adapt your style by using successful techniques you like and avoiding those you don't like. Don't forget to adjust your personal style depending on the audience. You may be more playful in a workshop-type atmosphere than in a scholarly venue in which you are expected to be "the expert" in a particular topic.

Also, consider where you are situated in the program. Recently I was the keynote speaker at a mid-western state library conference. I was speaking on a Friday night, after dinner, the last speaker of a 3-day conference. I knew that my audience would be worn out and ready to go home. If I gave a solemn, scholarly speech, soon they would all be asleep. So I prepared a knock-their-socks-off humorous speech (with audience participation), but one with a strong research base. I worked on it for months. No one fell asleep and there was no mass exodus for the door, which I took to be positive signs.

Bringing the Speech "Alive"

This is an ambiguous term, but it seems to express best what I see as being a very important part of public speaking. You bring a topic alive for an audience by making it relevant to their own experiences. You also have to articulate to the audience why this topic is interesting to you; why you picked it and not another. If it is because you have a personal experience, share it. To tell us "what to do if you have to be the last speaker on the last night of a conference" is not half as interesting as telling us *what it is like* to be the last speaker on the last night of a conference. The

first is too abstract, cold, and simply not relevant to your audience. The second is interesting, it relates an event that this audience will perhaps not have experienced before, and it is concrete. They can identify with these feelings and understand why this is an important topic to the speaker. If the audience can pick this up, it too will feel interested. Bringing the speech alive is really injecting more of *you* into the speech as opposed to merely relating dry research

Bringing a scholarly topic to life can be a challenge. A similar challenge will face you in the classroom if you get to teach some rather dry material. I challenge myself to find interesting, even exciting ways to present such topics as dictionaries and encyclopedias in the basic reference class that I regularly teach at Pratt. Hopefully, you are excited about your research area. Some people become so bored with their dissertation topics that by the time they are presenting their results to audiences of scholars and/or practitioners they can't muster up any enthusiasm. Remember, even if you have become bored with your topic, your audience is hearing it for the first time. Find a way to re-engage yourself in your work. Hopefully, all of you still love your dissertation topics and don't have that problem. You are just the ones who are petrified with fear over public speaking.

Delivery

Speed

The majority of people are nervous about giving oral presentations, in fact public speaking ranks right up there as one of the most fearful of all life events, more feared than fire, earthquake, qualifying exams, or falling from heights. However, in some speeches, this nervousness becomes translated into the speaker *rushing* the speech. The speaker talks too fast, going through introductions and main points before the audience has been given chance to assimilate or even, in some cases, to understand the information being presented. If you feel this applies to you, make a conscious effort to *slow down* the speech. Don't be afraid to scan the audience for feedback to make sure they have grasped the point you are making. Pay special attention to rate when practicing your speech.

When you face strict time constraints in a scholarly setting, crafting the speech to fit the time limits, plus practicing your delivery, while timing yourself, are crucial. I frequently put up the ironing board in hotel rooms and practice my speeches to the mirror (or any unfortunate roommates who wander into the room, or even a spouse when available) before conference presentations. I generally practice the speech several times until I get the timing just right, rewriting as I go along. This is where I usually think of the jokes. Well, what I consider to be jokes.

Pauses

Related to speed is the question of pauses. Pauses are those times in a speech when you actually stop talking for a moment. Pauses are important because they signal the structure of the speech. They let the audience know when one part of the speech is ending and another is beginning: i.e., between the introduction and the main body, or between main points, or between the main body and the conclusion. Learning when and how to pause is a major challenge for most beginning

speakers. Even a moment of silence can seem like an eternity. This is may be initially difficult, but it is a device that is extremely useful in giving an effective and interesting speech. Pauses are also excellent opportunities to slow down and establish eye-contact with the audience. This allows you to scan the audience for evidence of understanding but it also has the effect of putting the audience "on the spot." By looking at them, you engage them, you demand their attention, and gain their interest.

Eye-Contact

I cannot stress enough the importance of eye-contact in public speaking. Without eye-contact, the most wonderfully structured and well researched speech in the world will be totally ineffective. It is through eye-contact that the communicative bond is established between speaker and audience. Thus, communication in public speaking is not just a question of delivery, or visual aids, or fancy language, but, at its most fundamental level, a matter of looking at the audience and having them look back at you. Speakers who refuse to establish eye-contact are perceived as tentative and ill at ease. At worst, they are perceived as insincere or dishonest.

More important than this, however, is that invariably a lack of eye-contact leads to a failure to be flexible. One ploughs through the speech with little regard to the audience's understanding, precisely because you are cutting off their feedback. The audience quickly becomes alienated from you and your speech loses impact.

Flatness

Some oral presentations come across as being "flat." By "flat," I do not mean the content was uninteresting, but rather that the delivery had little variation. Flatness is a problem because it is easy to lose the attention of an audience if it is not provided with variety. At various points in the speech, especially in the main body, devices should be introduced to regain the audience periodically. Humor might work for some people, or an example that touches on personal experience, or something surprising. It is important that speeches are not totally predictable.

Regarding delivery, flatness can be avoided by varying various aspects in the rate, volume, and pitch of the voice. Emphasize main points with pauses or an increase in volume. Vocal variety is an effective way of introducing that touch of "unpredictability" that will keep the audience with you. One can see the intimate relation that speed, pauses, and eye-contact have with this notion of "flatness." The trick, of course, is knowing precisely *when* to vary either rate and volume, or when to pause. One cannot explicitly "plan" this. It can only come with experience and being prepared to "read" an audience and adapt to it "on the spot."

Structure

All oral presentations benefit from thinking about the concept of *signposting*. Signposts are very brief statements that indicate exactly where you are in the speech." In my opinion, signposts are as important as content. Their job is to explicitly situate exactly where a point stands in relation to the speech as a whole. This means in relation to the *specific purpose*. Everything that is said in a speech is made in relation to a specific purpose. One cannot just "talk about a topic," as some have expressed it to me. One talks about a topic to achieve some objective, some purpose, some goal.

Signposting is a device by which the audience can be reminded of this. For example, in the introduction, there should be some statement to the effect that "this speech is intended to inform you of X." This signposts exactly what the purpose is. It is very important that the audience isn't put in a position where it has to guess what the purpose is. Other signposts include stating explicitly that you are now going to begin your conclusion; that you are going to summarize what has been said so far; that you are about to talk about your second main point, etc. In other words, when you begin to speak about something, you have to inform the audience exactly what it is you are doing. There is an important distinction here that you need to internalize to understand effective public speaking. A good speech not only tells us about its topic, it also talks about its own *structure*. It reveals its organization, of where introductions end and main bodies begin; where information is a main point or merely a device to elaborate a main point. Signposting reminds the audience that this content is not being presented in a vacuum, but is part of a greater structure that has been developed to achieve one specific purpose.

Conclusion

Conventional wisdom is that you should make sure you have a good introduction and a great conclusion, since that is all the audience will remember. Generally, I make it a point not to read my speech, to use notes to have a more impromptu, spontaneous delivery, but I do usually read my intro. and conclusion. This practice gives me confidence. My parting words of advice to you

- Say yes to every public speaking opportunity, nothing will help as much as experience.
- Try to speak at local conferences and build to regional and national venues.
- Be well prepared and practice the speech aloud several times.
- Your confidence will build.
- Think of each speaking invitation as an opportunity, your nervousness as excitement.

I look forward to hearing your presentations very soon. I will be in the front row, nodding and making eye contact. I am counting on you to make sure I don't nod off.

(Note: Thanks to Gary P. Radford, FDU, for sharing his public speaking expertise.)