

# The Craft of Professional Speaking

## Purposeful Design

### A. Questions to Consider in Early Preparation

**Purpose:** What is my main message (~conclusion)? Is my message neutral, positive or negative? What do I want the audience to take away with them? What do I need to be successful?

**Audience:** Who is my audience and what are they expecting? What do they want and need to know? Who is the main decision maker?

**Logistics:** How much time do I have to prepare? How much time do I have to present? How many audience members do I expect? Am I part of a team? Where will the presentation take place?

### B. Contents and Organization

For most professional audiences in the Anglo-American world, your approach will be appropriate if you

- Make your main message blazingly clear and refer to it throughout your talk.
- Choose your content and approach based on what the audience needs/wants and NOT what you know. Be selective in your content.
- Pay particular attention to your introduction and conclusion; your audience is most attentive in these sections. Your introduction should clearly indicate your key message as well as the scope of your presentation. Conclude your presentation by summarizing your key points and putting your message into some greater context. *Never* conclude with “That’s all!”
- Keep your main points clear and unencumbered by distracting detail.

### C. Effective Design of Visual Aids

The purpose of visual aids is to help the audience understand the content of your presentation and remember your key message. The aids should support your message. Your goal should not be (exclusively) to entertain the audience and display your prowess with presentation software. In other words, “Provide a high signal to noise ratio.” General conventions for success follow.

#### 1. Use clear, consistent and correct text

- Keep it simple, readable and immediately comprehensible.
- Honor hierarchy in text size: larger titles; smaller content lines of text
- Use sans serif fonts and no more than two font types (e.g., Arial and Garamond) per slide.

- Try to use a minimum of 20-point font size (sometimes hard in graphics).
- Avoid all capital letters; use italics and bold fonts purposefully
- Design aids from the point of view of the audience members farthest away from the speaker.
- Check for accurate parallelism, grammar and spelling.

## **2. Use color purposefully to emphasize content and minimize distraction**

- Avoid random use of color.
- Avoid ornate backgrounds.
- Keep in mind that contrast improves readability.
- Keep in mind that room lighting affects contrast: for a dark room, use light font on a dark background; for a well-lit room, use dark font on a light background.

## **3. Use graphics purposefully to emphasize content**

- Avoid clip-art clutter.
- Use recurring graphics (e.g., picture, logo or menu bar) for impact.
- Manage data: use graphs; avoid tables; have handout, publication or separate backup slides for discussion if necessary.

## **4. Fight against the temptation to use all the tools that presentation technology allows**

- Minimize the complications, dead time and embarrassment that loose cables, slow downloading, poor audio/video quality, faulty equipment, bad Internet connection, etc. can cause.
- Minimize special effects, e.g., sound and animation.
- Always have backup handouts.
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**5. Preview your slides as a projected slide show** to catch any features that seem acceptable on the small computer screen but are unacceptable projected onto a full-size presentation screen. Font size and color contrast are just two of many features that can change dramatically between the small and large screens!

## **Powerful Delivery**

### **A. To connect with your audience,**

- Respect them. Look at them and speak to them. Be conversational. Move around and gesture. If you simply stand in one place and read your slides or notes, the connection between you and your audience is non-existent.
- Look enthusiastic about your subject. If you don't seem interested, your audience will not be interested.
- Speak with confidence and make no excuses. Never undercut your message, yourself, or your reason for presenting. Don't apologize. Make your best effort, and the audience will appreciate it.
- Time yourself. Prepare for a talk that is 25% shorter than the time allowed. Rehearse your presentation well beforehand; leave time for questions. However, don't over rehearse. If you practice the talk too many times, it may sound as if you've memorized it, which is culturally inappropriate and dangerous in interactive contexts.

### **B. To use your visuals effectively,**

- Handle the aid as little as possible. Avoid using the remote control or mouse as a crutch. Display the aid only when you are ready to discuss it. Remove the aid when you are through discussing it. Turn off projection equipment when not in use.
- Compensate for your audience's divided attention. Increase volume and clear articulation of speech. Continue to talk while handling aids. Avoid excessive slides (more than 1/minute).
- Position yourself carefully. Always face and talk to the audience, not the visual aids.
- Stand or move at the sides of the screen, not between the audience and the aid/screen.
- Emphasize details by pointing at the screen, preferably with your hand and using verbal cues. Pointers, especially laser pointers, tend to be overused and distracting.

### **C. Know the ten tips for nervous speakers**

Most speakers experience a low level of anxiety before a presentation. You can make this feeling work *for* you instead of *against* you by doing the following:

1. Know exactly what your listeners expect from you. Ask the person who requested the presentation or a prospective audience member what they want.
2. If possible, familiarize yourself in advance with the room set-up.

3. Rehearse your presentation at least twice. The first time, focus on familiarizing yourself with your material and checking your timing. The second time, record yourself for playback, or present to a friend/colleague, and time the presentation. Ask for feedback.
4. Snack before you present. Speaking with an empty stomach exacerbates anxiety.
5. Avoid excessive caffeine, which also exacerbates anxiety.
6. Chat with audience members before the presentation.
7. During the presentation, speak directly to individuals for several seconds; choose individuals throughout the room.
8. Use your gestures to enhance communication, not distract from it. Be aware of nervous mannerisms (e.g., playing with a pen, stroking your beard, smoothing back your hair) and practice suppressing them.
9. Speak slowly and distinctly in a low register. A rapid rate at a high pitch indicates nervousness.
10. Prepare good notes in outline form and practice using them appropriately for an extemporaneous presentation.

#### **D. Know the seven tips for effective language choice**

##### **1. Use the active voice.**

E.g., We *initiated* this program to improve communication along the supply chain.

Not: This program was initiated to improve communication along the supply chain.

##### **2. Use personal language.**

E.g., *Our* goal here is . . . .

Not: The goal here is . . . .

##### **3. Use tactical language.**

E.g., *We're* going to examine . . . .

Not: *I'm* going to talk about . . . .

**4. Use short words and short sentences.**

E.g., We avoided problems in the following way. First, . . . . Next, . . . .

Not: We circumvented problems by engineering symbiotic solutions . . . .

**5. Use explicit transitions.**

E.g., *First*, we interviewed the participants. *Let me describe* . . . .

**6. Use word pictures.**

E.g., I think of cell phone movies *as film haiku*.

**7. Use unbiased language.**

E.g., To predict growth, we used a simple equation.

Not: To predict growth, we used an equation so easy even your mother (secretary, etc.) could solve it.

**E. Use common speech structure cues**

Skilled speakers use patterns that help the listener understand the content of their presentations. There are various rhetorical devices that a speaker can use to signal progression from one part of the talk to the next. Used appropriately, these signals make a presentation clear, move the listeners smoothly along, and provide coherence.

A critical listener is careful to recognize these signals and is then prepared for the organizational pattern that the speaker has indicated. For example, the comment “I am going to argue that Google’s Chinese policy is acceptable for a number of reasons.” alerts the audience to listen for a series of distinct arguments. On the other hand, the comment “I’d like us to look at how Google’s Chinese policy differs from its German policy.” indicates a comparative approach.

Some common speech structure cues are listed below.

**Introduction cues**

I’d like to start/begin by . . .

Let’s begin with . . .

As an introduction, . . .

I will first describe X and then I can explain . . .

## Organization cues

- *Generalization/Specific*

Generally speaking, . . .	In general, . . .
On the whole, . . .	Overall, . . .
By and large, . . .	For the most part, . . .

- *Chronological Order*

To begin with, . . .	In the beginning, . . .	First, 2nd . . .
Then . . .	Next, . . .	Following this, . . .
Afterwards, . . .	Subsequently, . . .	Before . . .
Ultimately, . . .	Finally, . . .	

- *Explicit Movement*

X, then, is the first . . . ; let's move on to another Y/the next . . .  
Now I'd like to consider/turn to/examine . . .  
What are the advantages/results/ etc. of this approach?

### *Comparison/Contrast*

Similarly, . . .	In like fashion, . . .
In contrast, . . .	In comparison to this, . . .
Likewise, . . .	On the one hand/on the other hand,

- *Cause/Effect*

As a result, . . .	The upshot of this is . . .
Thus, . . .	Therefore, . . .
If this occurs, then . . .	The outcome of this . . .
Because of this, . . .	Consequently, . . .

## Main idea cues

Let me stress that . . .	The principle point is . . .
Let me repeat. . .	The main idea is . . .
This is a major factor. . .	The remarkable thing is . . .
Why was this so important?	It is significant that . . .
I'd like to emphasize . . .	Most important to remember is . . .

### **Example or detail cues**

For one thing . . . for another . . .	For example, . . .
Moreover, . . .	In the case of . . .
For instance, . . .	Also, . . .
A few of these are . . .	In such a case, . . .
Furthermore, . . .	In addition, . . .

### **Past reference cues**

As I/John/Lydia said at the start of this presentation, . . .  
As I mentioned earlier, . . .  
In my introduction, I said . . .  
You will remember the example of X I gave you earlier.

### **Future reference cues**

I'll return to this in a few minutes.  
I'll come back to this later.  
I'll develop this in the next part of the presentation.

### **Digression cues**

Incidentally, . . .	But before we get to that, . . .
That reminds me. . .	That makes me think of . . .
By the way, . . .	Of course, . . .
But first, . . .	First let me . . .

### **Amendment cues**

I just remembered . . .	I forgot to mention . . .
I almost forgot . . .	I just realized . . .

### **Summary & conclusion cues**

In conclusion, . . .	Finally, . . .
To summarize, . . .	To conclude, . . .
In summary, . . .	I'd like to leave you with this final X

## Productive Interactions

As students and professionals, you are expected to work with others productively to accomplish tasks. The contexts may vary—academic study groups, group projects for a particular class, committee work, professional project teams, or high-stakes work meetings. In effective groups, members reach their goals and are satisfied with their experience. They recognize the contributions of all members and share a sense of accomplishment.

In some of these contexts, you can be assertive and take steps to increase your chances of working effectively together. Successful groups establish ground rules, have a facilitator, communicate frequently and openly and have strategies to avoid, or deal with, common group problems.

### A. Learn strategies for effective team presentations

The key to a successful team presentation is to ensure that it is organized, unified and coherent. Keep in mind the following six guidelines when planning.

- 1. Organize by content area.** As a team, organize your total presentation into sections based on logical content areas, not on number of team members. Then decide on the order in which the areas will be presented. After the agenda is organized, decide who will cover which area. One speaker may cover two content areas or two speakers may divide up one area. Match personalities with content area. One team member should introduce and preview the entire presentation. The goal is to present a coherent whole with the content as the focus.
- 2. Provide graceful content transitions.** Conclude your area with a section summary and a content link to the next section. Use the following speaker's name when linking to the next section.
- 3. Use visual aids consistently.** Use the same technology, software, color scheme, font size, and layout throughout. Be sure each of you introduces your visual aids with statements that make clear your motivation for using them.
- 4. Rehearse as a group.** Meet and practice your complete team presentation, introducing and concluding, using the exact transitions, and explaining your visuals as if "it's the real thing."
- 5. Answer questions consistently.** When planning the presentation, decide on a question-and-answer format. If you decide to handle questions at the end, choose a facilitator to direct questions and decide whether you will sit or stand to answer questions.



**6. Be a team player.** When you are listening to other team members present their content areas, remember that you are still in the spotlight. Listen attentively and use listening body language to show your interest. If you indicate that you are distracted or bored with what your team members are saying, how can you expect others to listen actively?

(Adapted from Mary Munter's *Guide to Managerial Communication*, P-H, 1999.)

## **B. Follow guidelines for successful Q & A sessions**

Question and answer sessions are useful for three reasons. First, listeners will be more attentive if they feel they have a chance to be involved. The sessions can also provide you with feedback on your subject. In addition, you can judge from the questions and comments how well you have communicated your information. You and your audience can benefit a great deal from the Q & A session if you

1. Let your listeners know in advance how you would like to handle questions. Do you want them to ask questions as you speak? Would you prefer that they save their questions and comments for the end of the presentation?
2. Set a time limit for the question and answer session in order to keep a lively pace and to limit long debates. As the time limit draws near, let the audience know by using an expression like "We have time for one more question."
3. Remember to acknowledge and reward participants; check for satisfaction.
4. Ask for clarification if you do not understand a question.
5. Answer each question as directly, but as completely, as you can.
6. Always remain calm and polite, even if your questioner is not. If necessary, suggest that the time limit precludes further discussion of an antagonistic question. Suggest that you meet to discuss the contentious point after the presentation is over.
7. Do not feel that you have to appear to know everything. Feel free to use one of these gambits if you do not know the answer:  

<i>I'm afraid that I can't answer your question.</i>	<i>I really can't say.</i>
<i>Perhaps someone else can answer that.</i>	<i>Frankly, I don't know.</i>
<i>I'll check and get back to you with that info.</i>	<i>It's impossible to say.</i>

## **C. Strategies for Effective Group Work**

Successful group work requires a willingness to participate and to focus: it also requires a willingness not to dominate and to discourage others from doing so.

1. Show good listening skills. Give physical attention to each speaker through effective body language and listening expressions. Be sure you understand a speaker's point before you react. Use expressions of clarification.
2. Support every group member's right to speak. Know your group members and understand their strengths. Encourage discussion by acknowledging all ideas. Use expressions like "Let's consider X," not "That won't work because...." Disagree with ideas, not with group members. For example, "Can you explain how X will work?" is more productive than "Joe's idea won't work." Look for places where you can agree and for places where you can ask questions.
3. Stick to the agenda. Avoid extraneous topics. Make your points quickly at the appropriate time. Unless you are giving a formal report during a meeting, you should never speak for more than a few minutes at a time.
4. Prevent dominance. Avoid interrupting, arguing, criticizing or over-defending. The group facilitator should
  - Be sure that everyone has a chance to speak
  - Use tactful reminders of the ground rules
  - Deliberately seek comments from the less assertive members

#### **D. Establishing Group Ground Rules**

As you establish your group ground rules, consider the following questions:

1. Work norms. How will you distribute the work? How will you establish the schedule and the guidelines? How will you handle cases when group members do not fulfill their commitments? How will the work be reviewed? What if members have different opinions about the quality of the work? How will you handle different work habits?
2. Facilitator norms. What responsibilities will the facilitator have? How will you choose a facilitator? Will you rotate the position?
3. Communication norms. Between meetings, which medium is preferred: telephone, e-mail, texting? How frequently will you check for messages? Does everyone understand the concepts of active listening and appropriate participation?
4. Meeting norms. What is everyone's schedule? Should one person be in charge of coordinating meetings? Where will meetings be held? How will you handle latecomers or absent members? Can people eat or smoke at meetings? What if someone dominates the discussion? How can you change norms if someone is uncomfortable with the team dynamics?

## E. Active Listening vs. Poor Listening

Active Listeners	Poor Listeners
Look at the speaker as s/he talks	Frequently interrupt speaker or finish their thoughts.
Notice nonverbal communication (gestures, tone, eye contact)	Ask too many questions about details
Listen for a speaker's structuring cues	Change the focus of the discussion (e.g., That reminds me of X; That's nothing--let me tell you about.)
Limit their own talking	Rush speakers, making them that time is being wasted.
Use feedback cues to show they're paying attention: nodding, murmuring agreement	Show interest in something other than the conversation, discussion or presentation.
Actively check for comprehension and use clear expressions of clarification	Fail to value <i>productive</i> conversation.

## F. Guidelines for Giving and Receiving Constructive Feedback

Anglo-American communication is characterized as “direct” and “to the point.” However, we tend to soften our approach when discussing potentially sensitive issues in several ways:

1. We couple uncomfortable truths with positive observations. For example, “Your research sounds very exciting. More examples of how it is used in the transportation industry would have been useful.”
2. We use question structure. For example, “Can you provide a few examples to help make this concrete?”
3. We use our needs to point out weaknesses. For example, “I’m sorry—I’m having a hard time hearing you.”

## G. Essential Gambits for Constructive Feedback

Providing and responding to suggestions for change and improvement can be challenging. The following list provides some key expressions.

- **Making Suggestions**

May I make a suggestion?	We might want to consider. . . .
Don't you think . . . ?	Are we sure . . . ?
Wouldn't you say (agree or think) . . . ?	Why don't we try
Wouldn't it be better if we. . . ?	I'd like more . . .
Let's . . .	Perhaps we could . . .
Why not . . . ?	How about . . . ?
I suggest that we . . .	

- **Asking for Suggestions/Advice**

Do you have any suggestions?	Can you think of anything we've missed?
What do you think?	

- **Accepting and Rejecting Suggestions/Advice**

That's a good point (idea, approach)	That would be great, except. . .
Thanks for reminding me.	Yes, but don't forget . . .
Yes, why don't we try that?	Yes, but keep in mind
I want to think about that	Yes, but consider . . .
I hadn't thought about that.	Possibly, but . . .
That's a good idea, but . . .	Well, the problem is. . .

## **H. Effective Impromptu Speaking**

Speaking with little advance preparation--impromptu speaking--can be intimidating. Effective spontaneous speaking is, however, essential for success in academic and professional life.

### **1. Common contexts requiring good impromptu skills**

- Interactive classes, such as those based on case studies
- Study groups
- Team projects
- Professional meetings and networking
- Job Interviews
- Q & A sessions of presentations
- Poster sessions

### **2. Strategies to help in these situations**

- Anticipate the likelihood of your contributions being solicited and the topics being covered in a given context. In most cases, you will be asked to speak on a familiar subject.

- Speak briefly and directly to the point. Do not ramble or repeat yourself. Unless the context requires it, do not feel that you must provide a lengthy treatment of a topic. A refined three-step approach works well:
  - Make a short statement to enter the topic
  - Concisely make your point
  - Exit gracefully
- If concrete detail and examples are required, try to relate your contributions to the topics and experiences you know best.
- Use gambits to “buy time,” organize your thoughts and create movement.
- Remember the power of nonverbal communication. Speak at a reasonable rate and volume. Use your eye contact, posture and gestures to convey confidence and sincerity.

### 3. Sample gambits for graceful impromptu communication

#### *Hesitation (don't overuse) topic/Framing*

Well  
Let's see  
Let me think  
How can I describe/put/explain

#### *Introducing the*

I have two points to make.  
I have conflicting reactions.  
X has raised a good question.  
I'd like to add something.

#### *Movement*

Let me first  
The second/third/last X  
Why is this a good approach?

#### *Reference*

As X said earlier  
We decided last week  
X gave a good example of

### **Concluding**

To summarize,  
So, these are the reasons  
I'd like to hear what others think about X.  
Do you understand what I mean?

## Selected Resources

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