



Version 1.0

Public speaking

Nine keys to effective presentation



inDepth

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Introduction

This guide outlines the basic skill sets required for giving effective speeches to public audiences.

For all of the following skill sets there are some good practices that make it easier.

Firstly, ensure all speeches are rehearsed prior to delivery. Aim to give the speech in full a few times prior to the speech. This will help you smooth out phrases that look good in writing but don't deliver well when speaking. It will also allow you to get a more accurate estimate of the time required to deliver the speech. If there is a hard time limit you have an opportunity in advance to trim it back.

Secondly, aim to memorise your speeches as soon as possible. Initially, most people summarise their speech in bullet points, much the same as you would do for presentation slides. Make these as short as possible so you naturally have to speak rather than read. When confident with that, aim to just have a few key words or essentially subheadings for each part of a speech. These key words can be written on the hand or placed in a back pocket as prompts only to jog your memory. The best approach is to visualise these key words as objects (because it is easier to recall images than abstract words) and place them in a familiar setting. For example, you might have five objects that you mentally place in various parts of your kitchen (the fridge, sink, oven, pantry etc). During the speech, mentally rotate around the "kitchen", looking into each part of the place to look at the object you placed in there. With practice, this will help you deliver all your speeches fluently.

1. Preparation

Unlike conversation, speeches are designed prior to their delivery. The delivery is the outcome of researching your audience, deciding the speech purpose, the approach to be taken and the choice of structure.

All speech design begins with understanding your audience. It is important to adapt your content to its context and identify specific goals in terms of the impact you want to make on it. This will include identifying key messages.

The purpose of a speech can be to inform, entertain or persuade, among other purposes. Informing speeches will focus on clear organization of the information. Entertaining speeches will focus on building and releasing tension. Persuasive speeches will include a line of reasoning culminating in a call to action.

The approach taken for each of the above speech types will obviously be different. Consider the tone you want to set (e.g. serious or upbeat) and the basic strategy, which can include logical proof or emotional appeal.

The most common speech structure for informative speeches is an opening, body and close that mirrors the principle of “Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them”. This structure is designed to ensure your key messages are received and provides clear “sign posts” for the speech, so that the audience does not get confused at any point. For example you might have three key points which are reiterated in each section of the speech, including during the body (e.g. you might say “having covered point one, I will now move onto point two”).

Speech structure can be organized around almost any device including acronyms, chronologically, the natural parts of a topic, or cause/effect. There are also a range of problem/solution approaches such as “Situation, Complication, Questions, and Answer”.

The most important aspect of designing your speech is to ensure a powerful opening and close. This is because people will mostly remember the first and last thing that you say. Consider the use of quotes, humour or a personal story for the opening. A good strategy for the close is to link back to something evocative statement made early in the speech, giving the structure a satisfying “gone full circle” feeling, in a way that reinforces your key message.

2. Body language

The use of hand and arm movements, facial expression and overall movement of the body adds emphasis to communication. While words convey most of the semantic meaning, body language adds emphasis and can even change the communicated meaning of words. Effective use of body language can enhance the impact of a speech significantly.

Most people naturally use hand and facial gestures to emphasize points being made. In public speaking the aim is to strike a balance between total absence and overuse. You want to avoid looking like a stiff pole, but also looking labored or fake in making deliberate use of gestures. Good body language conveys sincerity and enthusiasm, making a speech more engaging and compelling.

Some key tips are to ensure that you address the whole audience, ensuring your eyes regularly visit all parts of the audiences. Make eye contact with specific people as you make specific points. If standing, try to move around the stage rather than staying rooted to one spot. Avoid repetitive movements such as pacing or rocking.

3. Voice

Like body language, the volume, pitch, rate and tone of your voice can change the meaning and effectiveness of public speaking. Volume should be pitched to reach

the whole audience and varied throughout the speech as appropriate to the content. Naturally soft speakers should consider use of sound systems, if not already available. Pitch (high/low) and rate (fast/slow) should also be varied. Again naturally fast speakers may need to practice slowing down.

The quality of voice sets the overall tone of the speech. For example, you may want to focus on sounding friendly or serious, depending on the nature of the speech. Speaking out aloud to warm up the vocal chords before the speech will help avoid a nervous tone in the first few minutes of your speech.

4. Word choice

Most people think they are perfectly capable of talking. However, the difference between a competent and great speaker is the effort they make in word choice and sentence construction. A general principle is to make speeches as simple but colourful as possible.

Use short words wherever possible and choose plain language in preference to jargon. Keep sentences as short as possible. It can be helpful to write a speech out and edit it. Initial drafts can usually be cut in half, while retaining full meaning, simply by looking for phrases that can be reduced from several words to one or two words. Similarly, look for introductory phrases that can be eliminated altogether. Written language is different from spoken language but the drafting processes will help make the speech shorter and ultimately more effective. There is a quote, attributed to several people, that reflects this sentiment: "If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter."

The only caveat to using words as economically as possible, is to ensure the speech remains interesting. Aim to use colourful and express words that paint a vivid picture in the mind of the reader. For example, instead of saying "the child waited for the teacher", you might say the "trembling child waited". Judicious use of adjectives, adverbs, similes, analogies and other rhetorical devices all improve the texture of a speech.

5. Authenticity

A key aim of public speaking is to present as an authentic and credible speaker. This simply means being yourself. The projects outlined in the manual are all designed to help you discover yourself, and develop the skills and courage to communicate as yourself.

A key tip is to ensure you speak in your own natural voice. Many speakers unconsciously put on a "public speaking" voice when on stage in front of an audience. Unfortunately, this reeks of insincerity. A good way of overcoming this

tendency is to adapt a conversational style of public speaking. The simplest way to do this is to ask the audience questions and engage with them.

A winning approach can be to deliver the barest minimum of a prepared content. Just set the scope of the topic and your key premise in an engaging and provocative way, then open the floor to the flood of questions. Addressing questions is a better guarantee of connecting with and impacting an audience than telling it what you think it needs to know. In online presentations, invite the audience to submit written questions for you to address.

A key determinant of how authentically you present is to sound as if you totally believe in what you are saying. It is important to remove hesitations, incongruent body and vocal language, and develop good fluency of delivery, using the memory tips outlined in the introduction to this section. Most people unconsciously insert annoying verbal pauses (ums, ahs, errs). These should be eradicated by replacing them with silent pauses. Record your rehearsals and count the number of verbal pauses, until they have disappeared.

6. Humour

Humour is one of the most effective ways of enhancing communication because it lowers people's resistance to your message. The key to effectively using humour is to ensure it is directly relevant to the point you are making (never use a random unrelated joke). Firstly, be clear on what the point or theme of your speech is, then think of things that are associated with that topic. Next, select one of the humor creation techniques and brainstorm possible humour. Note the keywords/themes are highlighted.

- **Exaggeration:** Identify some aspect of your point/theme that can be exaggerated and take it to a ridiculous theme. e.g. If your speech is on the importance of financial management you could say, 'we **spend** more on coffee than the national defence budget... "It's not just pie in the sky, it's a whole floating bakery."
- **Puns, double meaning:** Try to think if your key word has more than one meaning, e.g. He has a **will** of his own, she's trying to get him to make it out to her. A simple device is to create wacky definitions of the key words being discussed, particularly if an acronym is involved. e.g. Feline **distemper** means a cat that gets mad when you refuse to feed it.
- **Unexpected twists:** This is the basis of much humour. A simple technique is to create a list that is consistent for the first few items then diverges to something bizarre for the last item. e.g. There are three ways to get things done – do it yourself, ask someone else to do it, or ask your children not to do it.

- **Metaphor, simile and analogy:** These literary devices all note the similarity between features of different things, which can be used to good effect in humour, e.g. lawyers are like pelicans, they have very long bills.

In exploring humorous options, be aware that the best humour is related to emotion. The aim is to build tension by making people squirm, be angry or sad, and then release the tension with your punch line. It is important to include a pause just before delivering the punchline, which allows people to prepare for, focus on and absorb your punchline. E.g. lawyers are like pelicans...[pause], they have very long bills. Ideally, create multiple humour options using all of these techniques above and select the best one.

A key tip is to simply search the internet for jokes related to your key words. A secret in this approach is to understand that good joke or humorous story can usually be analogized to a large number of points. For example, an astronaut asked if he was nervous before lift-off responded "who wouldn't be? We are sitting on top of thousands of parts, each of which has been made by the lowest bidder." This same story can be used to bring to life points about capitalism, pessimism, courage, realism, complexity, risk etc.

It is important to remember that you don't have to be naturally funny because in speeches the humour can be "manufactured" in advanced, using the process outlined above.

7. Story

Stories are a powerful way of engaging an audience because humans are neurologically optimised to listen and tell stories. It is our most natural form of communication, originating from prehistoric days when tribal members told stories around a fire. Stories are used to convey any form of information and pass on wisdom across generations.

The true power of a story lies in the fact that the meaning of a story can and will be interpreted by audiences in different ways. Therefore a good story is relevant and has meaning for everyone.

Stories are good devices for opening a speech because it immediately captures a person's attention. Like humour, the point or moral of a story should be relevant to the overall theme of the speech.

Ideally, stories are personal and demonstrate your long association with the subject, the reason for your deep personal commitment and show that what you are about to say is believable. This adds to the authenticity tips outlined in skill set 5 earlier.

Weaving self-deprecating humour into the story can be a powerful way of showing you are human, just like the audience, thus winning them over.

Good story telling involves characters, a plot and tension, which doesn't get resolved until the end of the story. Aim to add colour and life to the story using hints from the public speaking skill sets outlined so far.

8. Presentation aids

Presentation aids include computerized displays such as slide shows, props and even the way you dress. The general purpose of such aids is to assist in the communication of complicated information. If the aid helps clarify the topic or focuses attention on a key point, the aid may be considered useful. However, if the aid is used simply as a crutch to support a nervous speaker, then it will be more a liability than a help.

If a topic is not complicated, then aim to avoid the use of slide shows altogether. Where slides are appropriate, they should be as abstracted as possible. For example, a single diagram is more abstract, with greater explanatory power, than spelling out the concept in several bullet points. Similarly, a picture can say a thousand words, but avoid meaningless imagery with only tenuous connection to the point being made. A key tip is to insert blank slides frequently to allow the audience to focus on the speaker at appropriate points in the speech. Ideally, every second slide should be blank.

Props can be more effective than slides in that they focus attention while allowing that focus remain on the speaker wielding the prop. Props are any tangible object connected to the topic. For example, if you are talking about the postal service, you might employ an actual letter, or parcel on the stage. It can be helpful to have a bag from which successive props are drawn.

Finally, the way a person dresses can be used to support the theme of the speech or to convey a sense of character of the speaker. For example, you can dress to convey the impression of being a fun, friendly person or a person who is serious and credible.

9. Persuasion

In the first skill set outlined above we noted the importance of having a clear goal for your speech. This final skill set is about bring together all the skills learned so far to deliver a powerful speech aimed at achieving your goal. Persuasion is the speaking element of power, which is discussed more fully in project 6. Key elements of power include your argument, credentials and confidence.

Your line of argument will vary depending on the nature and goal of your speech, as well as the particular audience. If the audience is already familiar with a subject,

with set views, it is normally only possible shift audience attitudes a relatively small amount. If the audience is opposed to your views, aim to get them simply to consider it as an option. If the audience is neutral then aim to persuade them that the subject is of real concern to them. If the audience already accepts your viewpoint, then you can persuade them to take action. Note that any speech trying to persuade opposed audiences to take action is likely to fail.

People naturally defer to experts. Think how most people automatically trust their doctor in medical matters. You need to establish your own expertise by clearly presenting your qualifications and experience. It is important to set your credentials out early in the speech (or the introduction). You don't need to give your life story. Focus on the detail that is relevant to the goal/subject of your speech.

A key determinant of persuasion is simply being and sounding confident about what you are presenting. In addition to the fluency tips presented in the introduction to public speaking skills sets, it is important to be and sound incredibly enthusiastic about your subject. People are drawn to those exuding energy and positivity, wanting to share in it. So you need to discover your own sources of enthusiasm for the subject and bring this to the fore throughout the speech. You can do this by expressing your own amazement at what you are sharing or by sharing personal anecdotes.

Conversely, it is important to not sound nervous. Firstly, reduce any sources of stress. Ensure you have rehearsed thoroughly. Arrive early or pre-visit venues you have not spoken at before to ensure you are comfortable with the arrangements. Check any electronic presentations are loaded and working.

Secondly, you can get yourself into the right frame of mind by 'acting as if' you are completely confident. Psychological studies have shown that smiling for two minutes will actually put you in a good mood, so put a big smile on your face leading up to the speech. Another powerful technique is the power stance. Find a private area and put your hands above your head like you have just won a great victory and hold for two minutes. This may feel awkward but it really does work.

Aim to stop rehearsing at least 15 minutes prior to allow yourself to become fully present in the moment, engaging with audience members. If you are particularly prone to nerves, focus on relaxing diaphragmatic breathing (pushing against your belly, not up in your chest) right up until you walk to the stage.