



Speaking of

Teaching

THE CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING • STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Creatively Speaking: Some Strategies for the Preparation and Delivery of Oral Presentations

Public speaking is an intrinsic part of our job, whether we are faculty and instructors lecturing on complex materials, graduate students preparing for a job talk, or students making a class presentation. As anyone who has experienced stage fright knows, presenting in public can be draining and challenging, but it needn't be. If your listeners catch on and engage with you,

others to join our intellectual conversation?

This issue of *Speaking of Teaching* features a range of practical strategies that the Oral Communication Program staff has developed for its courses, workshops, and individual consultations over the years. Our hope is that this newsletter will serve as a convenient summary of helpful strategies to keep in mind

To be sure, there is an art to effective speaking, but it is a folk art that is accessible to everyone who is willing to reflect on the medium of speech and to practice.

sharing your ideas in a public forum can be exhilarating in its power to stimulate interest and foster connection. To be sure, there is an art to effective speaking, but it is a folk art that is accessible to everyone who is willing to reflect on the medium of speech and to practice. As actors know, public speaking is a skill that can be learned and can improve with rehearsal and feedback. How can we best prepare our voices for this important task? How can we speak and present in ways that ensure we are heard and remembered? How can we present what is at the heart of our research in ways that invite

the next time you prepare to give a job talk, conference paper, or lecture, or prepare your students to give presentations.

The Listening Mind

Doree Allen, Ph.D.

Central to an effective oral presentation is a design that takes into account the needs of your listening audience. Obvious? It should be, but our focus as scholars, researchers, and writers often distracts us from our otherwise intuitive understanding of this basic tenet of successful oral communication. And although

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speakers in a variety of contexts frequently rely on an idiom more suited to writing than to speech, this tendency seems especially tempting for those who are presenting scholarly and scientific research that has appeared previously as a journal article or book chapter. However, a speech is not “an essay on hind legs,” as James A. Winans, a noted scholar of rhetoric, famously observed. As efficient as it may seem to borrow language and structure from a text you’ve already completed, there is also a lost opportunity to engage with your audience when you neglect to reappraise your material in light of this new rhetorical situation in which your audience is listening to your ideas rather than reading them.

Because the spoken word is evanescent, listening poses distinct challenges, especially when it comes to abstract subject matter. Studies reveal that listeners cannot process as much information as readers, they have difficulty staying oriented and, unless they hear something more than once, it is difficult for them to retain it. Given these constraints, here are some strategies to bear in mind when “translating” a text into an oral presentation, which should enable you to better know your audience so that you reach your listeners as well.

In the opening 60 to 90 seconds of a presentation you are not only introducing your topic but also yourself. So it is important to take advantage of this time, both to connect with the members of your audience personally as well as to orient them intellectually by placing your work in a larger context and providing a preview of what is to follow. More often than not, speakers will sacrifice this valuable time to turn away from the audience to read their titles (and sometimes even their names) from the slide projected behind them. How can you make your introduction more memorable? Some possibilities include opening with a startling statement or

statistic, a rhetorical question, a vivid anecdote, a challenge or a provocative quotation. But if these options feel contrived, you might simply consider how to link your subject to the experiences and interests of your audience so that you motivate their “need to know” and establish the common ground that is elemental to effective communication. Since listeners tend to remember what they hear first and last, it is similarly important to think carefully about your concluding remarks, which should not only summarize your main points, but emphasize their significance and suggest the implications of your analysis or research.

A strong introduction and conclu-

Public speaking is enlarged conversation.

sion are part of a clear organizational structure that should also include explicit transitions, internal summaries, and the repetition of key words and phrases. Because the listening audience is at a speaker’s mercy for organizing content, “signpost” language such as “first,” “next,” or “finally” reinforces transitions and marks your progress through your presentation, linking the details to your overarching thesis and acknowledging where you are in relation to where you are going. Introducing your main points with a rhetorical question can also help to keep your audience on track. And, because questions invite subliminal answers, they serve to sustain audience engagement.

To be sure, effective speaking and writing share many attributes; however, while readers can set their own pace, reread a complicated paragraph, or leaf back over several pages to refresh their understanding of the central argument, listeners cannot. Therefore, as a speaker you must think beyond content and be constantly aware of speech rate and pace,

attending to listeners’ need to keep up with what you are saying. Additionally, because it is difficult to listen to abstract discourse for very long, concrete language and examples — metaphors and analogies that make unfamiliar things familiar or vivid images that paint mental pictures — enable listeners to retain information and grasp abstractions or highly conceptual material. Simpler syntax and vocabulary rather than long, subordinated sentences and technical jargon also appeal more to listeners’ aural perception.

Rhetoricians often say that public speaking is enlarged conversation, and as sensible as this may seem, it is often a challenge to keep the

relational nature of speech in mind when the weight of our research or data crowds the audience out of our mental picture. We must remember that although our content is essential, there are — or should be — reasons why we are presenting our work orally rather than distributing it as a document. Of course, there are many motivations leading to each speaking opportunity, but one is simply the power of the spoken word and the ancient potential inherent in the communion of speaker and audience — especially when what the speaker says is meant to be heard and not read.

Effective Speaking: A Survival Guide

Tom Freeland, Ph.D.

There is an often-cited but probably apocryphal study claiming that public speaking is the world’s most common phobia, more fearsome to people than any other source of anxiety such as heights, spiders, the dark, or even death itself. If this is so, as Jerry Seinfeld observed, then at a

funeral more people would rather be in the coffin than at the lectern delivering the eulogy.

Whether or not it is actually the most widespread phobia, there can be no doubt that public speaking is something many people would rather avoid. It does not come easily, and even for those who can feel (or who at least can appear to feel) comfortable in front of an audience, an effective presentation requires substantial preparation—and even then so much can go wrong. Notes get mixed up, PowerPoint glitches appear out of nowhere, and even when everything goes as it should, there are still nerves to deal with. Communicating complex information to an audience is a daunting task, so it pays to bear in mind some fundamentals; individual stylistic choices then can have a firm foundation.

First, it can help to think of your presentation as a “nonfiction per-

Apply the “I.B.I.” test: Interesting But Irrelevant. Any item of information you include must pass this test; you must be satisfied that it is not merely interesting but relevant.

formance.” It is a performance, an event occurring in time and space, but rather than being a play or an opera or interpretive dance, it is nonfictional, based on your research. A presentation is something that you do, not just an inert mass of data, so you will need to turn your write-up into something you can comfortably speak, and that your audience can comfortably hear and follow.

Second, think about this audience. Who will be there? How much do they know about your subject? Will you need to define terms for them or explain basic concepts?

Third, be very clear about exactly what you want to accomplish. Be realistic about how much material you will be able to make clear in the time allotted to you—and, of course,

don’t run over your allotted time! Apply the “I.B.I.” test: Interesting But Irrelevant. Any item of information you include must pass this test; you must be satisfied that it is not merely interesting but relevant. Your standard for determining relevance is the purpose you have set for yourself in giving the presentation.

If you use notes or get your prompt from PowerPoint slides, try to talk from your notes, not to them. You need to know your material well enough to require only a prompt; speak to people as much as you possibly can, and pull the words up off the page.

If you use a visual aid, apply the I.B.I. test here as well. Every element of every visual must prove its relevance to the purpose of your talk. Keep the design of your visuals clear and easy to understand, and avoid the temptation to subject your audience to a dizzying succession of

slides. Less often is more, particularly where visual aids are concerned. And in your performance, try not to get pulled into the projection: here again, talk to people. The only reason you would ever actually need to look at the projection is to point out some specific item of interest, to guide the audience’s attention. Once you have pointed it out, however, you don’t need to look at it any more.

These basics should give you a good start. Bear in mind that an effective performance is grounded in effective rehearsal. Try out your ideas, sort through them, keep the good ones and let the less good ones go. Effective presenting is directly tied to your investment of time and effort: the more you work at it, the better and more efficiently you will be able to

allocate your preparation time. And eventually you will come to see that spiders are much more frightening than a live audience.

Working with Your Voice

Tom Freeland, Ph.D.

No matter how well-written your notes are, and no matter how clever and elaborate your PowerPoint slides are, sooner or later you will have to speak. You have probably thought about your voice, most likely when you wanted it to be different than what you thought it sounded like. But what is the voice? What goes wrong with it? Why does my voice sound so — (choose one) weird/high/low/nasal/soft/loud? The voice is at once a very straightforward and a very complicated phenomenon. On the one hand, it is simply a faculty of the body, the vibration of the vocal folds caused by the passage of air through the larynx. These vibrations are then shaped by the tongue, teeth, and lips to form specific phonemes, which in turn combine to become words, out of which we assemble phrases and sentences, and off we go from there, communicating. But voice implies so much more: it has to do with one’s presence and participation in social groupings. A voice is a vote; one speaks in the hope of being heard.

Voice also has a fraught relationship with one’s sense of self. I often am struck by how we seem for the most part reconciled to our visual appearance—most of us can look in a mirror and recognize the person looking back, but when it comes to the voice, that is not the case. How often do we hear a recording of our voice and feel alienated, swearing that this strange person speaking couldn’t possibly be us? There are physiological reasons for this — your voice really does sound different to you, with the sound transmitted directly to your ears inside you, through the solidity of your head. But the voice is also a

tremulous meeting point of mind and body. You have things you wish to say; there are people you want to persuade, to move, to amuse. There are things you need to do with your voice, and too often it doesn't come out the way you hear it in your head. What goes wrong?

We are all born with a rich and expressive vocal endowment, but when the mind bears down on the body with its list of demands, the body often balks, restricting our access to our full natural voice. There are, of course, vocal problems requiring long-term therapy or medical intervention (serious stammers or vocal nodes, for example), but the following tips can be used as the basis for a simple regimen of vocal hygiene that can help with a wide range of typical vocal problems.

First of all, RELAX! The most common difficulties people experience with their voices are rooted in tension. If you are tense, your breath is not flowing freely; you are probably squeezing around your vocal apparatus to produce a particular effect (to be louder or to force your voice into a deeper range); your jaw and tongue get tight, interfering with the clarity of your articulation. So take a moment to observe yourself. Where do you feel tense? In the shoulders, abdomen, jaw, or elsewhere? Just let it go! It all

tions in your text to mark places to breathe. Also, a nice slow, deep inhalation is the best way to deal with stage fright. Practice inhaling on a count of four or five. This will slow down your pulse rate and help your mind to clear, restoring a stronger sense of control.

Next, RELEASE your voice. Let it be something you allow to happen, as opposed to something you have to make happen. Drop your breath deeply into your abdomen, and let your diaphragm support your voice. Every baby knows how to do this—you'll notice that babies can project their voices just beautifully without going hoarse!

Then, MAGNIFY your ARTICULATION. In addition to improving clarity, magnifying articulation also serves to slow a speaker down. Most people speak too quickly in formal situations, and this will help tremendously in improving projection. Combined with better breath support, improved articulation will go a long way toward fixing most people's projection problems.

Finally, remember to GESTURE, fully and fluidly. Gesturing correlates with vocal variety. If you have a tendency to fall into a monotone, try gesturing more. Gesturing should not be forced or artificial, of course;

you prepare and deliver a public presentation of your research. Often our topics are so specialized that even an informed audience would have a hard time following our presentation if we confined ourselves to disciplinary language and narrative. How can we effectively connect with our audience, and turn our research writing into an oral presentation that involves our listeners? How do we organize our presentation in a meaningful and interesting way if we have a lot of data?

One way to look at oral research presentations is through the lens of storytelling, one of the oldest, most pervasive, and well-known forms of communal discourse. Stories build rapport, entertain, teach, persuade, and guide our behavior and interactions. Storytellers consciously consider their audience, as telling a tale is inherently a relational act. Stories encompass language and imagery that are immediately grasped by audience members and provide a familiar means by which relevant information is conveyed. Thus stories can serve as a critical connector between you and your audience.

Lest the reader think I am advocating that you start your talk with: "Once upon a time there was a lonely nanotechnology device on a journey..." let me clarify that this process is intended to be a way to conceptualize how the various elements of your research can be conveyed meaningfully to your audience; it can loosen your thinking and enable you to visualize new and interesting ways to describe what you study, and why it matters. Your focus as a speaker, ideally, is to convey a coherent narrative that captures your audience's attention, and this template is one way to do that. Were there moments of struggle or difficulty that you worked through in your research process? Is your original motivation for doing this research still what drives you, or

A voice is a vote; one speaks in the hope of being heard.

begins with awareness: identify those trouble spots, and train yourself to let the tension flow away.

Then, BREATHE! It stands to reason that you will need to be breathing in order for your voice to function. Most people do not breathe often or deeply enough in public speaking. Make sure that you do not try to speak for too long on one breath. Each new idea or major component of a more complex idea should get a new breath. You may even choose to make nota-

the idea is make sure that you are not suppressing any natural impulse to gesture. Make sure that gestures are appropriately scaled for you and for the type of speech and the space in which it will be given.

Telling the Tale of Your Research

Marianne Neuwirth, Ph.D.

There are many elements and components to keep in mind as

has it changed? Were there clues that surprised you and helped you unfold the “mystery” of your research question? (Notice that the root of the word “question” is “quest” — how is your research like a “quest”?) What do you hope to discover, or what have you discovered that is of significance? What is the “so what?” aspect of your research? What was the “ah-hah!” moment or turning point for you as a researcher? These are the instances that most often captivate listeners and sustain their attention. It is important to let your listeners know why your research matters to you, and how your discoveries and research are meaningful to their lives, even if the connection is only indirect.

There are two aspects of storytelling: the first is the construction of the narrative itself, and the second is the telling of the narrative. The construction of the tale of your research may not shift notably from the standard research question

Were there moments of struggle or difficulty that you worked through in your research process? Were there clues that surprised you and helped you unfold the “mystery” of your research question?

or hypothesis to methods, results, discussion, and conclusion, but the critical moments or turning points in your research can be highlighted in a way that builds curiosity and interest in your listeners and keeps your talk moving forward. You could describe a compelling example or a surprising find which motivated further investigation and yielded unique results, or an anomaly that required perseverance to comprehend. Accentuating aspects of your discoveries that are specifically relevant and revealing

helps the audience stay engaged.

By structuring your talk in a way that capitalizes on listeners’ responsiveness to suspense and their curiosity and desire to know more, you can draw your audience in while still maintaining your sense of competence and credibility. A student from Structural Engineering may start her talk by asking, “There are three buildings on campus that are most vulnerable to severe damage during the next earthquake — do you know if we are in one of them? I will let you know as my talk proceeds.” Striking fear in the heart of your listeners is not the goal, but rather, to create a sustained interest in your presentation.

Once you have laid out a clear and compelling narrative, you must breathe life into it with your oral and physical delivery. The allure of a spoken story is the expressiveness of the narrator. Your clarity, verbal pacing, emphasis, pausing, and visual mannerisms create an atmosphere that invites audience engage-

ment. Keeping a dynamic pace and animating details through gestures, facial expressions, and tone all contribute to creating connections with your listeners. Energy and enthusiasm suggest you are interested in what you are studying and help the audience stay engrossed and attentive. By carefully constructing and creatively telling the tale of your research, you may inspire your audience members to declare later, “I heard the best story today....”

Courses

CTL 115/215, “Voice Workshop.”

An innovative workshop focusing on correct breathing, voice production, expansion of vocal range and stamina, and clarity of articulation. Geared toward public speaking generally: presentations, lectures, job talks, etc. Can be taken in conjunction with CTL 117.

CTL 117/217, “The Art of Effective Speaking.”

This is an introduction to the principles and practice of effective oral communication. Through formal and informal speaking activities, students develop skills at framing and articulating ideas through speech. Strategies are presented for impromptu speaking, preparing and delivering presentations, formulating persuasive arguments, refining clarity of thought, and enhancing general facility and confidence at oral self-expression.

CTL 125, “From the Page to the Stage: The Performance of Literature.”

Explores the oral interpretation of poetry and prose as both a performance art and a mode of literary analysis, with the larger goal of developing speaking skills. Emphasis on textual critique, audience response, and delivery style. No previous performance experience required.

CTL 177, “Performance of Power: Oratory and Authority from the Ancient World to the Postmodern.”

Speech as action has long been seen as essential to leadership. This course examines theories and examples of oratory, from Aristotle to Margaret Thatcher, assessing each as a model of voice-activated authority. The course also surveys the impact of mass media technologies as they transform the public space of oratory.

CTL 180/280, “Interpersonal and Small Group Communication.”

This course explores and will enhance your personal effectiveness in interpersonal and small group communicating in the contexts of work, family, and society. Areas covered include listening, conflict resolution, leadership, power and its implementation, group dynamics, emotions, and cultural influences on interactions. Students will learn with the aid of a course reading packet, videos/DVDs, role-playing, interviews, individual and group presentations, and group exercises.

CTL 219, “Oral Communication for Graduate Students.”

This course addresses a range of graduate student speaking activities such as teaching (delivering lectures, guiding discussion, and facilitating small groups), giving professional presentations and conference papers, and preparing for orals or theses defenses. In-class projects, discussion, and individual evaluation assist students in developing effective techniques for improving oral communication skills.

Handouts for Your Classroom**Top Ten Ways to Conquer Your Fear of Public Speaking**

Jennifer Hennings and Lindsay Schauer

1. Figure out what scares you.

Investigate your fears by making a list of the specific things that make you feel anxious or afraid. Then make a list of ways you can cope with or address these fears.

2. Breathe deeply.

Practice breathing deeply and slowly. Think yoga style: breathe deeply while you're practicing, before you go on stage, and during your speech. You can also try the "calming sigh" exercise: inhale deeply, then let out a vocalized sigh as you exhale.

3. Warm up your body before speaking.

Exercise reduces tension and helps you concentrate. Getting a little bit of physical activity before your speech will calm you and help you get rid of excess nervous energy. Try taking a walk outside, doing arm circles or stretching gently.

4. Practice.

Formal practice before a speaking event will help you feel more confident about what you're going to say and how you'll say it. But informal practice in social situations (talking in class, speaking to people you don't know at a party, etc.) will also help you conquer some of your speaking anxiety and fears.

5. Visualize success.

Picture yourself succeeding and having fun. Close your eyes and do a mental rehearsal of your speech once or twice before you deliver it.

6. Get enough sleep and have a good breakfast.

It's important to take good care of yourself and follow your morning rituals before a speaking event. Don't drink coffee if you're not a coffee drinker (or if you're a regular coffee drinker, make sure to get that daily cup the day of your big speech). Being rested will also help you feel less anxious.

7. Visit the space ahead of time.

Get as many details as you can about the room, the audience, the equipment, your time constraints, etc. Do you need a watch, or is there a big clock at the back of the room? Will you have a podium? Where will the audience be around you? Is someone going to introduce you, or will you need to introduce yourself? If you're speaking on a panel, find out about the set-up.

8. Play the Worst Case Scenario game.

What's the worst thing that could happen? What will you do if that does happen? Often, even the worst possible situation isn't as bad as you think.

9. Take the pressure off yourself.

Very rarely does anyone give a completely perfect speech. Your audience will understand if you make mistakes. Think of every speech you give, and the mistakes you make, as stepping stones toward becoming a more effective speaker.

10. Visit an Oral Communication Tutor (OCT)!

Our OCTs hold office hours seven days a week and are available to tutor all undergraduate and graduate students at Stanford. Tutors can videotape you, offer feedback and advice, and can meet with you consecutively as you work to brainstorm, organize and practice a speech. And it's free! Visit <http://speakinghelp.stanford.edu> to schedule an appointment.

Handouts for Your Classroom

Powerful Pointers: Using PowerPoint to Your Advantage

Jennifer Hennings and Lindsay Schauer

A great PowerPoint presentation can indeed brighten up a speech and shed light on concepts a speaker wishes the audience to grasp. But, if done poorly, PowerPoint can bring down an entire oral presentation, befuddling listeners and distracting from a speaker's own voice and message. So, before assembling a list of slides to display alongside your speech, think twice about how you'd like PowerPoint to play a role in your presentation. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when inviting PowerPoint to share the stage with you.

- **Put the VISUAL back into visual aid.**

As ubiquitous as PowerPoint has become, not all presentations need PowerPoint. Instead of turning to PowerPoint as a default, consider first the central idea, main points and key examples of your presentation. Where might your listeners benefit from a visual explanation of your material? (In some cases, the answer may be: "I'm just fine without a PowerPoint presentation, and I have better visual ways to get my point across.") DO use PowerPoint to illustrate key concepts with images, graphs, charts or videos. But AVOID text-heavy slides that replicate the content of your speech. You, not your slides, should be the focal point of your presentation.

- **Eschew obfuscation. (Translation: Be clear and simple.)**

Use large (size 24+) sans serif fonts like Ariel or Helvetica and choose a color scheme with sufficient contrast (black font on white, yellow font on navy blue). Avoid flying fonts, sound effects and other distractions. When you present data, include only the figures or studies that you will discuss. Extraneous information can confuse or distract your listeners.

- **One slide, one idea.**

PowerPoint slides are cheap. Instead of cramming multiple graphs, charts or ideas onto one slide, give each concept its own real estate. Not only will this enable you to enlarge your fonts and images, it will also help you avoid overwhelming your audience.

- **Know your transitions.**

How do your slides relate to one another? Why are you presenting them in this order? Understand the order of your slides, and use verbal transitions between slides to highlight the overall reasoning and structure of your presentation. Try using transitional phrases containing internal previews and summaries. ("Now that we've looked at the history of home-schooling, I'd like to look at two key case studies.")

- **Speak to your audience, not to your PowerPoint.**

Your effectiveness as a speaker depends on your connection with the audience. Resist the temptation to break this connection by turning to read from your PowerPoint slides! Instead, face the audience and make eye contact with as many people as you can. You might gesture briefly to your slides when you need to draw the audience's attention to a certain feature, but in general it's important to maintain a physical orientation toward your audience. If you're concerned about losing your place, try speaking with a brief set of notes in front of you.

- **Can you PD the TLAs in your AOP?**

It's important to define key terms throughout your presentation, especially when using acronyms or technical jargon specific to your discipline. If your language is particularly complex or unfamiliar to your audience, consider including brief definitions of key terms in your slides.

- **Carry a second parachute.**

Projector bulbs burn out. Computers crash. Cable adapters disappear. Have a back-up plan (overhead slides or handouts) in case your PowerPoint takes an unexpected vacation.

- **Get a second opinion.**

Oral Communication Tutors (OCTs) can give you feedback on using PowerPoint effectively. Visit <http://speakinghelp.stanford.edu> to make an appointment.

Recommended Reading

Alley, Michael. *The Craft of Scientific Presentations*. New York: Springer, 2003.

Linklater, Kristin. *Freeing the Natural Voice*. Hollywood: Drama Publishers, 2006.

Atkinson, Max. *Lend Me Your Ears: All You Need to Know About Making Speeches and Presentations*. London, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Heath, Chip and Dan Heath. *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. New York: Random House, 2007.

Naistadt, Ivy. *Speak Without Fear*. New York: Harper Resource, 2004.

Tufte, Edward. *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*. Cheshire: Graphic Press, 2001.

Oral Communication Services:

The Oral Communication Program at the Center for Teaching and Learning offers courses, workshops, and individual consultations for graduate and undergraduate students. We also work closely with faculty members and instructors across the curriculum to tailor speaking components for their courses. More information about the program is available at <http://ctl.stanford.edu/Oralcomm>.

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**"If you ask me what I came into this world to do, I will tell you:
I came to live out loud." Émile Zola**

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