

Speech Preparation Guidelines

Speeches and presentations are critical components of many careers. Like so many other things in life, writing and giving a good talk depend on solid preparation, even before you create your first PowerPoint slide. You must consider your audience and messages up front, create a well-structured presentation, and practice if you want your speech to engage the understanding and interest of the people you are attempting to inform or persuade.

Here, we guide you through steps to improve your oral presentations.

Objective(s)

Before you start, what are you trying to accomplish in the speech?

- Are you trying to inform, explain, persuade?
- Are you attempting to move people to action?
- Are you providing information that will serve as the basis of later analysis?

Audience Analysis

- Who is the audience?
- How important is the topic to them?
- Which aspects of the topic are most relevant to them?
- What do they already know?
- How do they feel about you, your topic?
- What do you share with your audience in terms of values, attitudes, background?
- How does your speech fit into the day/program/larger news of the week?

Messages

What are the one, two, or three messages/pieces of information that the audience must leave with? State them as clearly and as simply as possible, then try to state them even more clearly and simply.

Elements of a Good Speech

1. Organization

What kind of organization is best for your speech? How will you organize your main points?

- **Logical**—This is a very powerful and traditional mode of presentation in which one builds an argument deductively, starting with a key premise, providing various proof points or evidence in support of those points and then ending (if arguing deductively) with an “inevitable” conclusion. Alternatively, one can argue inductively by starting with the solution, and then offering your proof points as you make the case.

- **Problem-Solution**—This is another strong mode of argument, particularly for research presentations. It sets out the challenge facing science or society, often talks about what has been done to date (which has proved insufficient or alternatively has provided helpful learnings), and ends with a solution to the problem (e.g., your research). It is important in these kinds of talks to ensure that your presentation of the problem is not too big or too overwhelming, unless your solution is significant enough to seriously confront the problem you have presented.
- **Chronological**—These are talks that work from the past to the present in order. This is a good structure to help get folks up to date on an issue and then prepare them to hear what is going on today or what will go on in the future.
- **Spatial/Geographical**—Here, you organize your points based on where the work is taking place (good for multi-site research trials, for example). You can go from East to West or South to North or in some other direction to help listeners connect the various sites together.
- **Modular**—This means organizing your talk based on key ideas, points, or sections that may or may not be directly related otherwise. This is a common, perhaps default mode of presentation, but one of the weakest. It does not help the listener connect the pieces of your talk in meaningful ways or lead that listener logically to your main messages or points.

2. Making the Argument or It's All Greek to Me

In all speeches, but especially in persuasive speeches, you will have to present evidence in support of your main points. Since the time of Aristotle, four types of appeals have been identified. A good speech will use more than one and perhaps all.

- **Ethos**
This appeal relies on the credibility of the speaker (testimony) or the credibility of the sources of information cited.
- **Logos**
This appeal relies on logical argument and can take a number of forms. It is characterized by the use of facts and statistics.
- **Pathos**
This is an emotional appeal that relies on stories and anecdotes that inspire, outrage, or build a common visceral bond with the audience.
- **Mythos**
This is an appeal that relates the topic at hand to larger social or cultural themes or values (patriotism, justice, freedom, compassion, etc.)

3. Powerful visual images

Using strong, relevant visual images can boost the impact of your presentation considerably. Look for photos, illustrations, charts, etc. that lend meaning and value to your subject.

4. Beginnings and Endings

How you start a presentation creates an initial impression that will affect the rest of the talk. How will you get the audience's attention, establish your credentials, credibility, and concern for the topic, and smoothly introduce your main topic?

- Tell a story that guides audience into your topic.
- Refer directly to the topic.
- Use humor that steers audience to the topic.
- Pay the audience an honest compliment.
- Establish a common bond with the audience. ("I'm one of you.")

Similarly, how you end will influence what the audience remembers about your speech. How will you end with conviction and on target?

- Tell a story that illustrates your main point.
- Use a poem or dramatic quotation.
- Summarize your main points.
- End on time.

Delivery

Once you're confident in the organization of your written presentation, you need to consider the physical venue for your talk as well as your actual delivery.

- If possible, check out the venue ahead of time so that you feel comfortable with the set-up and know where things are.
- Have a glass of water within reach.
- Arrange your notes so that they're easy to refer to.
- Be sure to project your voice and pace yourself.
- Make eye contact with the audience.
- Instead of standing behind a podium the whole time, move around in front of your audience (but don't pace!).
- Keep an eye on the time.
- Breathe.

Remember, this is your work you're presenting. You know it best!