**Preparing Effective Oral Presentations**

Presentations that inform, persuade, inspire, and motivate listeners require careful preparation and practice. The information below will help you make knowledgeable decisions about the content and delivery of your presentation so you can maximize its effectiveness. This handout is designed around the five criteria for evaluating oral presentations (see attached), so you know what to do in order to achieve “proficiency” or better in relation to each criterion.

1. **Focus your presentation on a clear *central message*.**

The central message of an oral presentation is analogous to the thesis of an essay or research paper. It is the core idea or main “take-away” of your talk – the principal thing you want your listeners to remember after your presentation has ended. However, since your audience consists of *listeners* instead of *readers*, you have to work even harder to make sure they hear, understand, and retain your central message; they can’t turn the page back to an introductory paragraph to re-read it!

An effective central message is:

* ***Comprehensive*** – it embraces all the major issues, claims, or arguments you’ll address in the course of your talk.
* ***Clear*** – it is stated specifically at the beginning and end of the presentation, using concrete, colorful, and active language, and often repeated or paraphrased in the body of the presentation as well
* ***Concise*** – it is succinct and pithy, which enhances retention.
* ***Compelling*** – it addresses a significant topic worthy of the listeners’ attention and, possibly, action (depending on the purpose of the presentation)
* ***Catalyzing –*** it serves as the springboard for all the other content you’ll include in your talk, inviting your audience to listen as purposefully as you speak. The most successful kind of central message is presented as a *claim* which needs to be substantiated by arguments, explanations, and evidence – which, of course, you will provide in the rest of your presentation.

1. **Choose and “signpost” a purposeful *organizational pattern*.**

The organizational pattern reflected in a presentation is both practical and strategic. Not only does it make the presentation easier to follow, it also has the potential to make the central message more convincing. The organizational pattern you choose should be appropriate to your purpose and subject matter, and should follow naturally from the kind of central message you are seeking to convey. You should also provide verbal “signposts” as you speak, so your listeners know where you have been, where you are, and where you will go in your presentation.

Each part of a presentation serves a specific function for the listener, as described below.

* ***Introduction***
  + Stimulates attention and interest
  + Establishes the significance of the topic and the credibility of the speaker
  + Relates the topic to the specific audience
  + Provides initial statement of the central message
  + Previews the body of the presentation
* ***Body***
  + Clearly identifies and sequences a limited number of main points or key ideas (generally no fewer than two but no more than five)
  + Reinforces the central message through the strategic selection of a specific pattern governing the sequencing of the main points or key ideas. Commonly-used patterns include:
    - *Topical*
    - *Chronological*
    - *Problem-Solution or Need-Plan*
    - *Cause-Effect*
    - *Pro-Con or Strengths-Weaknesses*

One good way to check whether the pattern you have selected will reinforce your central message is to phrase your central message as a question that your presentation is designed to answer, and then see if your organizational pattern is well-suited to answering the question.

* ***Conclusion***
  + Signals the end of the presentation
  + Reiterates central message and key points
  + Reminds the listeners of the significance of the topic (answers the “so what?” question)
  + Leaves a vivid impression so the presentation is memorable
* ***“Signposting.”*** Throughout the presentation, you can help your listeners follow your organizational pattern by using “signposts” to help them recognize and track the sequence of ideas and information. Some common signposting techniques include the following:
* *Previews* ***-*** forecasting the main points or key ideas of a presentation

“In this talk, I will describe and illustrate five types of organizational patterns in effective presentations.”

“Our presentation explains the problems audiences experience in remembering key points in a presentation, and shows how signposting helps to solve these problems.”

Notice how these previews tell the listener how many sections there are in the body of the presentation, and also signal the type of organizational pattern – topical in the first example, problem-solution in the second.

* *Transitions* – referring back to a just-completed main point and forward to the next main point

“After you have selected an appropriate organizational structure, you need to provide a variety of evidence to support your main ideas.”

* *Connective phrases* – “In addition to,” “Consequently,” “However,” etc.
* *Enumeration* – “First,” “Second,” “Third,” “Finally” [but not “firstly,” “secondly,” etc.]

1. **Select compelling *supporting material*.**

The supporting material illustrates, amplifies, and substantiates the main points or key ideas – and by implication, the central message – of the presentation. Like the organizational pattern, the selection of supporting material hinges on a series of strategic decisions.

Effective supporting material is:

* ***Tailored to the audience.*** Here are some questions to consider as you decide what information and analysis to incorporate into the body of your presentation: Who will be listening to your presentation and why? What knowledge, experiences, attitudes, assumptions, convictions, and habits do they bring to your topic and purpose? How might demographic factors (age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic characteristics, etc.) affect the way your audience responds to the supporting material? Are there substantial differences among the members of your audience that you will need to accommodate, or are they more homogeneous? The supporting material you choose to substantiate your key ideas and central message should speak strongly to the particular people who will be listening to your presentation.
* ***Varied.*** The most common types of supporting material include:
* Definitions
* Explanations/elaborations
* Examples and illustrations (brief or detailed)
* Quotations (eyewitnesses, experts, or “average folks”)
* Analogies
* Statistics

Different kinds of supporting material serve different kinds of rhetorical purposes. Narrative examples, for instance, can show the depth or complexity of an issue for individuals, while statistics can convey its scope or significance for a broader community.

* ***Reliable/credible.*** The sources of supporting material are just as important in oral presentations as they are in written assignments. The authority, trustworthiness, representativeness, and recency of information sources are all important indicators of the reliability and credibility of the supporting material they provide.
* ***Vivid and memorable.*** The compelling example, startling statistic, colorful quote, or thought-provoking analogy can lend emphasis and significance to the point you are trying to make, and help your listeners remember your message.
* ***Consistent with the relevant main point or key idea.*** There’s a reason that examples, statistics, quotes, etc. are called “*supporting* material.” Their purpose is to substantiate a main point or key idea, which in turn supports the central message of the presentation. Check to make sure your supporting material really says what you say it says.

1. **Make thoughtful *language choices*.**

The specific words you choose to convey your central message, main ideas, and supporting material should be appropriate to your audience, the occasion, the topic, and the purpose of your presentation. They should also help your listeners recognize and follow the organizational pattern you have selected. Finally, they should help make your presentation vivid and compelling.

The following practices will help you make thoughtful language choices.

* ***Audience and occasion analysis.*** Are there technical or professional terms your audience members know that they will expect you to use? Conversely, are there terms they don’t know that you will need to explain? Are you making a formal, professional presentation intended to inform or persuade, or a more casual presentation intended to entertain?
* ***“Wordsmithing.”*** Thoughtful word choices can move a presentation from mundane to memorable. Many of the principles you rely on to make your writing vivid also work in speaking situations. Here are a few pointers that are particularly helpful for talks and presentations.
* *Practice good grammar.* Since oral presentations are often extemporaneous (delivered from notes rather than a complete manuscript), you need to be especially vigilant in avoiding words or phrases that are currently in vogue but grammatically incorrect, such as “based off of” (instead of “based on”) or “she goes” (instead of “she said”).
* *Portray specifics.* Concrete and descriptive language is more precise and memorable than vague claims. “Property crimes have increased by 50% in Dover County over the past five years” is much better than “Recently, crime has been getting worse” (What kind of crime? Where? How much worse? Since when?). Here again, watch out for common phrases that might work at cross-purposes with your aims. Excessive use of “kind of,” “sort of,” or “like” can blur the precision of your material.
* *Paint pictures.* Use descriptive and expressive phrases that call up images, feelings, or experiences for your listeners. Similes, metaphors, personification, stories, and analogies make your supporting material vivid. For example, “Break Out of the Bubble” is a much more compelling way to describe St. Olaf’s annual civic engagement workshop than “Community Involvement Day.”
* *Play with your phrases.* Word choices, like color choices, can make a presentation “pop.” Sparing use of common rhetorical devices can help draw attention to main points and serve as signposts for the organizational pattern of the presentation. Two such devices are parallelism (using the same grammatical form or structure to convey a series of ideas) and alliteration (repetition of beginning sounds). The supporting material in this section on “wordsmithing” uses both devices (the four points are all phrased as succinct imperatives, and all begin with the letter P).

1. **Practice and polish your *delivery*.**

Effective delivery involves both the voice and the body. As you practice your presentation, aim for the following:

* ***Expressive use of the voice.*** Use your voice to highlight and reinforce the content of your message.
* *Volume:* Make sure you can be heard easily by everyone in the room, but don’t be louder than you need to be (especially if you are using a microphone – if the volume is up too high, your voice can be grating or irritating).
* *Pace:* People need time to process what they hear. Although you don’t want your presentation to drag, you do need to speak more slowly than you might think, especially if you are feeling a little nervous.
* *Variation:* Make sure to vary the pitch, tone, and inflections of your voice to sustain attention and interest.
* *Pauses:* Pauses are the oral equivalent of punctuation. Pausing after the central message, a key point, or a compelling bit of supporting material adds emphasis, gives people time to absorb what you said, and serves a signposting function.
* *Fluency:* Avoid vocal fillers such as “um,” “uh,” “like,” “you know,” or “right.” The more familiar you are with your content, and the more you practice your delivery, the less inclined you’ll be to rely on these fillers to get you from one point to the next.
* ***Purposeful use of the body.*** An effective presentation is a “whole body” activity that involves:
* *Confident posture and well-placed position:* Stand tall (don’t slouch or hunch over your notes or laptop screen, especially if you are at a podium) with your weight distributed evenly between your feet. You needn’t be frozen in place, but you should avoid rhythmic shifting, swaying back and forth, and fidgeting (be especially careful if you have a pen or pointer in your hand!). If you are supplementing your presentation with slides, a poster, or other visual material, make sure you are not blocking anyone’s view or casting a shadow anywhere.
* *Sustained eye contact:* Aim to have your eyes more often on your audience members than on your notes, and look around so you include the entire room, not just one side or the other.
* *Appropriate gestures and facial expressions:* As in ordinary conversation, a limited number of gestures – a raised hand, an inclination of the head – can add interest and emphasis to key points; however, too many gestures can be distracting or appear artificial. The same is true for facial expression. You can indicate your commitment to your own message with appropriate facial responses (showing concern when conveying serious or disturbing material, smiling when you are using humor), but your expressions should not distract from your words.

Effective presentations depend on informed and purposeful choices in relation to your central message, organizational pattern, supporting material, language, and delivery. Seek feedback from your peers and professors as you prepare, and remember that no one knows your material better than you do!