

Center for Food Security and Public Health Public Speaking Handbook

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Building on Your Experience

What Have You Seen Speakers Do?

Effective Characteristics of Speakers

Ineffective Characteristics of Speakers



Learning (and Re-learning) Communication Skills

According to Jo Sprague and Douglas Stuart, authors of The Speaker's Handbook, the learning of a skill often progresses through four stages:

- Stage 1 **Unconscious incompetence.** In this stage a person is not aware that he or she is making errors in some area, and may even be unaware that there is a skill to be learned.
- Stage 2 **Conscious incompetence.** A person in this stage has made the realization that she or he is doing something ineptly, and that there is room for improvement. In many cases this awareness creates anxiety, which actually increases incompetence.
- Stage 3 **Conscious competence.** In this stage a person has taken a skill in which she or he feels incompetent, has improved, and then devotes a portion of consciousness to performing it competently. The absence of such vigilance is likely to mean a regression to more comfortable but less competent patterns. However, if a person perseveres, the awkwardness of the new behavior diminishes and the need for self-monitoring lessens.
- Stage 4 **Unconscious competence.** Now a person has integrated the learned skills well enough that he or she need not devote conscious attention to maintaining competence – it comes naturally. The skill becomes relatively effortless, and maybe even fun.

Strong oral communication skills require so many different competencies that we may experience a variety of the stages of skill development simultaneously. Because someone recently brought to our attention our habit of saying “um” during presentations, we may be at Stage 2 in relation to pauses, but we may be at Stage 3 when it comes to our ability to structure our presentations well. We may even be at Stage 4 when it comes to hand gestures since, as we speak, our hands move in natural ways that help us to emphasize our points and to engage audience attention. Nevertheless we may be at Stage 1 with our speaking stance and not even realize that when there is a podium or table to lean on we tend to balance on one foot while speaking as the other foot moves aimlessly. It is fine to focus on developing these skills separately; you will soon find that improving one area will lead naturally to improvements in other areas. For example, increasing your facial expressiveness will typically lead to increased vocal variety as well.

Our goal, of course, is to reach the stage of unconscious competence. When you reach this point you can increase your effectiveness exponentially since you can do more than just talk; you can actually have the freedom to pay attention to audience feedback and to make spontaneous adjustments to enhance the quality of the communication interaction. But until you reach that point, remember that audiences respond to your overall presentation, not to the separate elements and they will make positive assessments of your overall competency even if some elements of your speaking style are at the Stage 1 and 2 levels.

Success in Oral Presentations

Certainly doing presentations is a complex business. The central task, of course, is to know your content. However, your ability to build on and to successfully communicate that learning to others will be a significant determinant of your success. The materials prepared for you by the Center for Food Security and Public Health will help you create the content of your message, and you will need to get a grasp on the conventions of discourse within the various settings within which you may deliver your presentations. Those materials and conventions answer most of the “what to say” and many of the particular “how to say it” questions. But there are some important general issues to consider as you begin developing a presentation. Whether you are preparing a lecture, a television interview or an interactive question and answer session, the first task is to understand the expectations and demands of the speaking situation. Start by asking questions about your speaking situation and then make good decisions based on what you learn.

Ask about the audience.

- How many people will be in the room?
- How are they prepared for the session? [Background in this subject?]
- What are their expectations? [Level of formality? Opportunity to ask questions?]
- What are their needs? [Why are they there?]

Ask about the setting.

- How will the room be arranged?
- What technical equipment or visual aid support is available in the speaking space?
- Is a microphone necessary? Is there one available?

Apply your audience analysis.

- Recognize that oral presentations do not follow the same conventions as papers.
- Be sure that your oral presentation adds value to the visuals. If it doesn't, then rethink your presentation strategy. What are the advantages to sharing this information in person rather than through a written report or a PowerPoint show sent via email?

Follow common guidelines on speaking.

- Have an overall goal or focus of the presentation and then limit the number of main ideas that you expect listeners to take away to two to five main points. Throughout the presentation remember to focus on the big ideas—listeners probably don't need to know the minutiae of how you found your information—they do need to know the “why,” the “what,” and the “wow!”
- Recognize the fact that listeners' attention spans are limited and can be sporadic. When listeners both hear and see new information their retention can increase—visual aids can help you do this.
- Focus on the message, on the content and enjoy it. If you act like you are interested in what you are talking about, you can help the listener be interested too. Remember that they aren't there to judge you, but to learn something of value to them; give them that and they'll happily overlook whatever presentation flaws you think you might have.
- Speak with confidence. You were invited to speak because you can share something the audience wants to know more about. Let that knowledge enhance your confidence.

Understanding and Dealing Positively with Anxiety

The first step in working towards successful delivery is to constructively manage your anxiety. Understanding the three phases of anxiety, changing the way you think about anxiety and taking proactive steps before, during and after your presentations can help you succeed.

I. Three phases of anxiety

1. Anticipation: minutes before the speech. You may be experiencing one (or a combination) of the following: racing heart, sweaty palms, butterflies in the stomach, dry mouth, shaky hands, quivering voice.

2. Confrontation: standing up and facing the audience. Physical symptoms of anxiety are intensified. This often feels like “The Moment of Truth”--do you fight or take flight?

3. Adaptation: approximately 60 seconds into the speech. Physical symptoms begin to subside--heart rate slows, breathing normalizes; you start to relax into your speech. (This phase is often overlooked because we tend to focus on the more intense physical reactions of the first two phases.)

It's important to notice when you move into your adaptation phase--this is where you are able to “get into” the speech and really connect with the audience! Knowing that the adaptation phase is achievable allows you to realize that anxiety isn't the enemy. Instead, you want to look at anxiety as a helpful tool in the delivery process.

II. Reframe how you think about anxiety and the speech-making process

1. Anxiety can be helpful. Anxiety is a sign that you are motivated to do well! Use your anxiety to help rather than hinder you by preparing rather than procrastinating. As you speak, remember that well-channeled anxiety can give your presentation extra energy and your eyes and face an extra glow.

2. You can develop techniques to manage, though not eliminate, your anxiety. Breathing properly is vital. Before your presentation, take long, deep, slow breaths. Four counts in; eight counts out. Imagine the air you're breathing in is blue (relaxation) and the air your breathing out is gray (stress). Your body will begin to relax and your heart rate will begin to slow. You may want to do some discreet muscle tensing and relaxing as well. Start with your little toe and work your way up to the tip of your head. Repeating a positive phrase like, “I know my material well and I'm excited to share it with my audience,” helps to replace any self-sabotaging phrases that may creep in.

3. Audiences want you to succeed as a speaker. Because the audience is interested in what you have to say, they really do want you to do well. Rather than being preoccupied with delivery, the successful speaker stays focused on the communication goal. Ask yourself: “Am I making good choices that will help my audience understand and appreciate my message? Audiences are very forgiving of “mishaps” as long as the message is worthwhile.

III. Specific strategies for reducing speech anxiety

1. Preparing for the Presentation

- Pay special attention to preparing and rehearsing the introduction.
- Wear clothing that is both comfortable and that helps you to feel at your best.
- Investigate the room before the speech. Visualize your speech in that room. See yourself giving the speech successfully to a warm and interested audience.
- Rehearse the speech with an outline; don't try to say the same words every time.
- Plan to use visual aids that will let you move during the speech.
- Rehearse some body movement—gestures and steps so that you can release nervous energy in a positive way.
- Use positive self-talk (Tell yourself you are ready to do a great job.)

2. During the Presentation

- As you walk to the podium be sure that your body language exudes confidence.
- Look at the audience in a friendly way before beginning to speak and take a couple of good breaths.
- Don't rush the introduction.
- Let yourself notice audience members who smile or nod their head. Focus on your success in communicating with them clearly.
- Do not apologize ahead of time for any errors or for being nervous (they can't really tell!).
- Adopt behaviors that appear relaxed and comfortable (a reasonable pace, a smile, a comfortable pause, a nice gesture, an off-hand remark, eye contact spread around the room, good vocal variation).
- Engage the audience rather than trying to hide from them.

3. After the Presentation

- Give your self credit and accept compliments graciously.
- Learn from any mistakes, but don't beat yourself up. There is no perfect speech. Focus as much on what you did well as you do on what you hope to do next time.
- Ask for feedback on your presentation.

Making the Presentations Your Own: Introductions, Conclusions and Connecting Ideas

Though materials, scripts and slides are provided, you will need to make the presentation your own in order to maximize its impact for the particular audiences you address. A great way to begin that process is to create your own way of opening and closing the presentation as well as developing transitions that help you and your audience remember the main ideas.

I. Developing Introductions:

The introduction sets the stage for the entire presentation as well as the audience's initial impression of you as a speaker. The purpose of the introduction is not only to introduce the topic, but also to mentally prepare the audience to learn from and act upon the material that you'll be covering. Since your goal as a speaker is to make sure that the audience understands, believes and is motivated by the message you have to tell them, you'll want to make sure that your introduction is engaging, establishes your expertise and encourages their involvement.

Here is a general order you will want to develop:

Step 1 *Attention getter*: An audience's attention is at its highest in the first 30 seconds of the presentation so you'll want to make sure you use something really dynamic to grab them right away. The Iowa State Center for Food Security and Public Health has provided several examples or scenarios you may use to gain the attention of your listeners. On the other hand, you may be able to share a story, a startling statistic from your region or county, a great quote or a bit of *tasteful* humor arising from your own professional experience or previous interaction with the particular audience. As long as you relate the opening directly to the topic you are well on your way toward focusing the audience's attention on your message.

Step 2 *Revealing the topic*: It seems like commonsense, but you want to make sure the audience understands the topic of the speech (just in case they weren't completely paying attention when you were introduced). That doesn't mean you need to say, "Today I'm going to talk about..." You want to be creative, but you also want to be clear so there's no confusion. Be sure to respond to the question they may be thinking about: What is the purpose of meeting together today?

Step 3 *Relating to the audience*: Once you have the audience focused on the topic, you'll want to tell them how the topic specifically relates to them. It's important not to assume that the audience will understand the relevancy of the topic. To make the topic relevant you might want to tell the audience why you feel the topic is important, how the audience could use the information, or how the information may affect them or how it has affected others who are like them.

Step 4 *Credibility and Goodwill*: Audience members also need to understand your connection to the topic. In most cases your expertise—the credentials that make you a qualified speaker on the topic—will be established by the individual introducing you. However, you still want to make sure that the audience trusts your ability to present the information accurately and sincerely. Be sure to share with the audience your personal investment in the topic—what particularly interests you about the topic? What experience do you have? Let the audience know that you are speaking because this is important to *you*; this will encourage them to find the topic important as well.

Step 5 Preview: The preview is the road map you give your audience to navigate the presentation. You'll want to choose key words to express the main points of your talk clearly, concisely and in the correct order. Using the same key words throughout the talk provides road signs that help the audience keep track of where you are in the presentation. Saving the preview until the end of the introduction keeps the key words fresh in your audience's mind.

The main ideas you cover in your presentations will depend on the audiences you are addressing, but every audience will benefit from hearing clearly the problems and the solutions you will be developing in your talk.

Step 6 Delivering the Introduction. The introduction prepares the audience not only for your message, but also for your style as a presenter. To help them respond positively to the introduction, be sure that your opening words are delivered with strong eye contact and vocal energy. Aim to help the audience believe that you believe the topic is important, you are prepared to speak with them, and that you value their attention.

II. Developing Conclusions:

The conclusion is the last impression the audience has of the speech and you as a speaker, so you want to think carefully about how you end the speech. Like the introduction, there are specific steps you'll want to follow to make sure you close confidently and leave the audience thinking about your message.

Step 1 Signal the end: The conclusion should never sneak up on an audience. Using a verbal signal like "In closing;" "Let me wrap this up;" "Now that we have discussed;" "Let me close by..." is a clear indication to the audience that the end is near. You can strengthen the verbal signal with skillful delivery. End the last sentence of the last point with a clear declarative tone, you can then pause while you look down a moment, perhaps take a step or two and begin your conclusion. Once that signal is given, audiences expect you to wrap up very quickly.

Step 2 Summarize main points: Bring back the key words you've been using throughout the speech to signal the specific points and remind the audience of the key concepts you'd like them to *really* remember. Linking the points back to something in the introduction, such as your opening scenario, is not only a good way to reconnect with the audience, it also gives the speech psychological unity. If your last main idea in the presentation was a call to the listeners to take action be sure to renew that call to improve their practices in disease risk management.

Step 3 Strong closing line: You want to make sure the audience knows when you're done and a clear closing line is the best way to do that. Deliver this with emphasis and with no upward lilt of the voice—there should be no question that this is your last statement. The kind of closing line should be chosen based on the final tone you'd like to leave with the audience. If you are speaking in a formal situation—one where there is likely to be applause at the end of the presentation—be sure to end with a nice declarative sentence. Avoid ending your speech with "Any questions?" Audience's are confused by this informal closing when they're waiting to applaud, and you can lose the magic of the closing moment, taking away the audience's opportunity to reward your efforts.

III. Connecting the Parts of the Presentation

In an oral presentation it is terribly important to provide road signs to help the audience keep track of the movement of your thoughts and to spell out the connections between your claims and evidence and between the points of the speech. After all, the listeners can't simply re-read a passage when something is unclear or when their attention wandered for just a moment.

Transitions are the most common way that we connect our ideas. Transitions briefly mention what you were just talking about and signal where you are headed next.

“Now that we have looked at the governmental policies and acts supporting our response to this threat, let's look at some of the agencies currently in place.”

“We have seen the ways to recognize these diseases, now let us turn to ways to control outbreaks.”

In a complex presentation you may also use strategies such as internal previews and internal summaries to restate and reinforce your ideas so that the audience can see how it all fits together.

Internal Preview: “There are basically two ways that these diseases are spread: first, through direct contact with the agent, specifically through aerosol, oral ingestion, or direct animal contact; and, second, through indirect contact, including fomites such as car wheels or boots or through vectors, such as insects. Let's look more carefully at each of these modes of transmission so we can better understand how to interrupt each of them.”

Internal Summary (and then a transition): “We've had a chance to explore the complex issues surrounding our responsibility in responding to this threat by looking at agent recognition and the direct and indirect modes of transmission. In addition we've looked at the steps each of us can take to decrease the likelihood of transmission.”

Another common way to connect your ideas together is to provide **Signposts** or signal words that let the audience know exactly where you are in the presentation. Signposts include terms such as “first”, “second”, or “third,” as well as common phrases like “not only” or “another way to look at it.”

Questions offer another way to show the connection between the ideas in your presentation and to re-establish audience attention.

“Some of you may be wondering, ‘who is going to fund all of this work?’ Well, that's a question I am happy to answer before I close tonight.”

Finally, some other simple words that are very useful to listeners are those that signal the logical relationship between your ideas. Phrases such as like “because,” “since,” “as indicated by,” or “in view of the fact that,” consistently signal to listeners that the next statement functions as a reason or as evidence for a claim. On the other hand, phrases such as “therefore,” “it follows that,” “it is reasonable to conclude that,” “we can see that,” consistently signal to listeners that the next statement functions as a conclusion or something that has been proven by the preceding evidence. Exercise care when using these logical indicators so that listeners do not feel misled by your argument.

Delivering with PowerPoint

Useful PowerPoint Commands

To advance one slide or to proceed through a series of builds on a slide

- Click the left mouse button, or use any of the following keys: down arrow, right arrow, spacebar, N, or page down. Select one of these six options and apply it consistently.
- Mouse buttons often make an audible click, so avoid using them, especially for builds during the presentation. However, the freedom of movement gained by using a remote mouse outweighs any concern about a minor click.

To step back one slide or to remove the most recent build on a slide

- Use any of the following keys: up arrow, left arrow, P, page up, or backspace. Select one of these five options and apply it consistently.

To move forward or backward in the presentation by more than one slide

- Using the number keys, type the slide number (refer to your presentation printout) and hit return.
- This tool is useful for adapting to time constraints or for responding to questions.

To have a blank black screen at any point

- Hit the period key or B key to toggle the screen between black and display.
- Use this technique to refocus audience attention, field questions, or take a break.

To have a blank white screen at any point

- Hit the comma key or W key to toggle the screen between white and display.
- Use this technique to refocus audience attention, field questions, or take a break. The white screen is particularly helpful in a dark room.

To draw attention to a particular point or feature of the slide

- Use the “pencil” feature to circle, underline, or point to elements on the screen. To enable it, click on the right mouse button while in presentation mode and choose “Pointer Options.”
- Used sparingly, this strategy can be useful in a lengthy presentation since it lets you change the look of the slide for the purposes of underscoring or emphasizing a particular point for that particular audience.

To maintain control of your presentation

- Avoid the automatic advance features of the system.
- Set up a remote mouse system if it is available to you (but make sure it is properly installed and that you have extra batteries for the remote mouse).
- Rehearse the presentation with the technology; practice advancing the slides and creating the builds to develop timing and muscle memory.

Presentation Tips for PowerPoint Delivery

Manage the speaking environment

- Avoid letting the audience sit in total, or even deep, darkness.
- Encourage audience members to sit closer together if they are scattered around the room and there are many empty seats.
- Check the front of the room.
- Arrange for a table on which to set up the equipment.
- Use an extension cord so that you need not rely on your batteries.
- Arrange for a lectern or podium for your notes, if you need one.
- Have some way of lighting your own notes.

Maintain eye contact with the audience

- Occasionally glance at, but do not read to the audience from, the screen behind you.
- Similarly, do not read from (or stare at) the computer screen in front of you.
- Prepare speaking notes for use during the presentation, but do not read to the audience.
- Spread eye contact to all parts of the room so listeners feel you care that they, as individuals, understand this information.

Set a speaking rate that helps the audience absorb and digest the information

- Resist rushing through the presentation. The audience is absorbing information both orally and visually. They need time to take it all in.
- Be open to feedback from the audience suggesting a need to slow down, speed up, or take a break.

Use your voice to maximize impact

- Use variety in your speaking rate and inflection.
- Give your audience time to absorb your message by using meaningful pauses rather than “um” or “and.”
- Use your voice to signal the most important information on each slide.

Use your body effectively to help enliven the message

- Avoid staying right next to the computer during the entire presentation.
- When there is a slide that will require more than a minute of speaking time, feel free to move away from the computer. As you move, share your energy and interest in the topic by gesturing toward the audience in a way that adds emphasis to your verbal message.
- Use a moment of silence once in a while as you make your way back to the computer to advance to the next screen. As you get more proficient, you will find that you are able to continue speaking as you move to the computer.
- If you are on a stage and must stay near the computer, be sure that your face and upper body gestures are at times quite dynamic so that you can engage listeners through physical delivery.

Public Speaking Tips: Maximizing Practice Time

You've thought about the delivery style that will best convey the message, now you need to work on the physical act of presenting the speech. Practice is the number one tool to minimize anxiety and increase confidence. Make sure to give yourself plenty of time to run through your presentation several times to achieve maximum comfort level with your material and the technology.

1. *Practicing successfully means practicing with speaking notes. This is how you can really make these talks your own.*

Remember, the audience *needs* you to connect with them and speaking from a manuscript makes this incredibly difficult. Not only does a manuscript create a physical barrier between you and your audience, studies have shown that using a word-for-word manuscript increases a speaker's anxiety, reduces speaker spontaneity and inhibits a speaker's ability to be flexible in his/her response to audience feedback. Speaking notes, on the other hand, are key words or brief phrases that function as “reminders” for the speaker, allowing the speaker to focus on communicating *ideas* rather than reciting the script.

2. *Practicing successfully means finding several ways to say the same thing.*

If the majority of the audience appears confused after an explanation, you need to rephrase the information to help them comprehend. Finding several different ways to say the same information not only prepares you for this moment, it also increases your own understanding and comfort level with the material. (You can see how speaking and practicing from a script could make this very difficult!)

3. *Practicing successfully means practicing OUT LOUD and consciously saying the material differently each time.*

Mentally practicing is helpful in retaining the material but should never be substituted for the physical act of saying the material out loud. What sounds good in your head may not transfer as well to the “real world.” In order to maintain your flexibility, you'll want to practice the speech several different ways so you're able to stay open to audience feedback. As we all know, things do not always go as planned and giving yourself several different experiences with the same material will help you to stay composed should something go awry during the presentation.

4. *Practicing successfully means delivering your speech in front of a practice audience.*

Your goal as a speaker is to connect with the audience and help them understand the information, so it's important to practice in front of a live audience to provide you with an opportunity to work on your audience adaptation techniques. This audience could consist of family members, friends, coworkers, or just about anyone who's willing to listen and to offer constructive criticism on your speech. Speaking in front of these people may feel awkward at first, but they will provide you with the kind of environment you'll be facing for the “real deal,” not to mention some great suggestions for making your speech the best it can be!

The Finishing Touch: Tips for Facilitating Question and Answer Sessions

A strong question and answer session is often a key part of a successful oral presentation. It offers a great opportunity for you to interact with the audience and to gain immediate feedback about the ideas raised in your talk, so it is essential that you are prepared to respond to questions and to competently facilitate the session.

To Prepare for Q & A

Anticipate

- Find out how speakers typically handle Q & A sessions within this speaking environment. Will listeners expect to be able to interrupt you to ask their questions or will they follow the traditional structure of holding questions until the end?
- Consider the likely questions and formulate possible responses before you speak.

Practice

- Articulate responses to likely questions. This is especially important if your presentation is likely to provoke controversy. You need to plan your strategies to clarify or further support your positions in a respectful manner.
- Rehearse sharing extra examples or stories that can bolster your case.

Adapt

- Be flexible in your presentation so that you can accommodate the Q & A session. If your listeners expect a highly interactive session, be sure to reduce the length of your speech as needed to allow for the exchange.

Prepare

- Create a clear closing line for the Q & A session. Work on a gracious way to indicate the end of the question and answer session and to leave the audience with a positive impression.

To Facilitate Q & A

Clarify Intentions

- Establish a sense of how much time there is for the question and answer session. (Either you or the person running the session should say something such as: "It looks like we have 15 minutes left for questions" or "I'll be happy to take 3 or 4 questions before we adjourn.") Be firm about cutting off questions when the predetermined limit is up.

Listen Carefully and Restate

- This helps you clarify the question, ensures that the entire audience hears the question, and gives you a moment to consider your response.

Speak to the Group

- Direct your response to the entire audience rather than only to the questioner.

Be Brief

- Give simple answers to simple questions. When faced with a complicated or unwieldy question, answer concisely and then offer to meet the questioner later for further discussion.

Be Straightforward

- If you do not know the answer to a particular question, refer the question to someone else or offer to get back to the questioner with an answer.

Prime the Pump

- If an audience seems hesitant to ask questions, yet there is plenty of time left, consider asking a question of the audience. Or share an interesting question someone else asked you recently and respond to it.

Maintain Control

- Do not allow one person to dominate the question and answer session or turn the session into a debate. Try to maintain momentum to sustain the interest of your audience. Signaling a willingness to continue the conversation at a later time is generally regarded as a mark of an ethical speaker.

Close Confidently

- Use your prepared closing or something developed in the moment so that your presentation ends on a confident, professional note.

Checklist for the Day of Your Presentation

Before you leave home:

- Research your audience and speaking situation.
- Dress comfortably. Wear clothing appropriate to the setting. Consider layers to adapt to varying temperatures.
- Have handouts printed and organized for distribution.
- Arrange to have a back up plan for visual aids (for example, if technology fails, have overheads ready).
- Be sure that speaking notes are organized, numbered, and complete.
- Consider taking a water bottle to combat dry mouth.
- If appropriate, bring business cards.
- Double check that you have all the necessary technical equipment for your presentation.

When you arrive at the speaking event:

- Plan to arrive about 30 minutes early.
- Check in and introduce yourself to the contact person.
- Set up equipment and check that it is working properly.
- Familiarize yourself with the room (lights, lectern, projection screen).
- Create your space - where will you stand, mental markers on the floor, visualize movement in relation to visual aid and audience.
- Practice relaxation techniques.
- Greet audience members as they arrive to develop friendly faces or leave to collect your thoughts and relax.