

# TIPS ON CLASS PRESENTATIONS

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Here are some guidelines and tips (and expectations) for your class presentations.

## Planning and Preparation

Start thinking from the end: what do you want your listeners to leave knowing or understanding? Try to articulate that goal as clearly as you can, then decide what information and what methods you will use to help your audience reach that goal. You may find that you want to lecture, lead a discussion, play a short game or do something else different, or you may use some combination of methods. You will probably find that you decide to cover less material than you originally expected, to make sure that the audience really understands the important parts.

I suggest that illustrate the presentation with appropriate visual materials. There do not have to be a huge number of visuals, but what you present should be strong and clear. I strongly recommend that you keep your presentations simple and clean; dancing, twirling, or shimmering words in Powerpoint only distract from your message. See me if you need advice.

If you want to lead a discussion as part of your presentation, develop a series of questions about the material you had the class read. You may want to start with some simpler, more factual questions and work your way up to the meatier material. Do not be afraid to get into difficult topics.

Also, note that you will be able to cover a lot less in your allotted time than you expect. Ten minutes, or 20 or even 30, can really fly by. Be realistic about how much you can include (and leave yourself a couple of spare minutes for questions and adjustments).

Start watching your professors and other people giving presentations to try to figure out what works well and what does not. Try to articulate exactly what makes a certain person or lecture effective, and what gets in the way for others. Then, emulate the good ones.

Please contact me at least two weeks before your presentation to discuss the topic—and come in with some good ideas in place (i.e., have done some significant library research already). If you think that it will be tough to get started, contact me even sooner. You'll need that lead time to pick out readings, so that we can post them a week before your class.

## Presentation Tips

To be effective when speaking in front of a group, you need to be able to make yourself comfortable. One way to do this is to understand that even though the audience is what makes a public speaker nervous, the audience is also what gives the speaker strength.

A public talk should feel like a shared, exciting event. Instead of “delivering a talk,” imagine that you are sharing your knowledge and excitement about a subject. Try to make your talk feel as though it were a small group of friends getting together because they were eager to discuss your subject. Granted, in a public speech you are the primary person one talking – but that does not preclude back and forth exchanges with the audience. The essence of effective public speaking is figuring out how to best develop your connection with the audience.

To give a good talk, a speaker must do the following:

- ◆ Know the subject of the talk well.
- ◆ Distill the vast subject into a chunk that is a) appropriate in size for the time allowed and b) appropriate in complexity for the audience.
- ◆ Pick out one or two key areas where you will go into greater depth to demonstrate depth of understanding and to engage the audience.
- ◆ Prepare visual aids (or auditory aids if the talk is on bird calls or music) that illustrate key issues and support your talk in an engaging way.
- ◆ Practice the talk the right amount: not too little (but not too much either).
- ◆ When actually giving the talk, let yourself show your excitement and your knowledge about the subject. If you can do this, most audiences will respond positively, and you will respond positively to their response—and then you into a positive feedback loop of interest and excitement. But to pull this off, you must work with the *audience*, NOT with the material you are talking about.

In many ways, the last issue in this list is the hardest part of delivering a good talk. You can be the world’s expert in a subject, with the greatest supporting materials, with a very polished prepared talk, but if you cannot connect with your audience, your talk will be flat. It is fine to be slightly nervous – if you are a little bit desperate, and crave the approval of the audience, you will work hard to captivate them.

Clearly, though, being too nervous is not good. Many people respond to their nervousness about a public talk by preparing a script from which to read, and by rehearsing the talk so many times that they have it memorized. That’s okay, but then they turn their task into one of acting, of being able to deliver memorized lines effectively. Don’t feel that you must commit the entire talk to memory; rather, be comfortable knowing the main points and the ways you will illustrate or elucidate those points. For most people, acting is much harder than speaking semi-spontaneously with excitement about something that you care about; the latter is what public speaking should be (in our view).

An additional problem with having overly extensive notes is that you become tied to them instead of being tied to the audience. To speak effectively you have to watch and listen to the audience, gauge their reaction, and adjust your talk. Are they nodding with understanding or staring blankly with confusion? Did they understand your last point? If not, and if it was a critical point, then you should try delivering it again, in a different way. Or perhaps people are starting to show excitement about what you are saying, and you might want to throw in an extra anecdote to give a deeply satisfying illustration of the point. If you have over-practiced your talk, you may not have the little bit of nervousness that will allow you to keep reaching out to

the audience (Are they getting it? Did they miss that last point? Are they with me?), and you may be so locked into your text that you do not have the flexibility to adjust the information you are sharing. Also, unless you are a very good actor, an over-practiced talk may come out sounding old (after all, you are probably sick of it yourself, after speaking it 9 times).

According to Bob Walsh of the Brandeis Theater Arts Department (I need to get the citation from him), audiences get about 55% of their information from the speaker's body and visual cues, about 38% from the speaker's voice, and about 7% from the actual content of the speaker's words. In other words, all that non-verbal stuff really matters in getting your points across. Here are some specifics.

- ◆ **Think backwards.** Start at the end: what do you want your listeners to leave with, what is most important for them to understand? Once you have articulated that, start moving backwards, deciding how to best help them learn that. Eventually, you will decide what you should say and what visual aids you should use. Your job will be MUCH easier if you know where you want to end up.
- ◆ **Practice your talk** with your notes, alone and then in front of a friend or a couple of friends, but do not over-practice. You want to be prepared but not burned-out or stale.
- ◆ **Do not script your talk** word for word, unless you are delivering the results of three years of research in 10 minutes and need to be sure you are not one second over that.
- ◆ **Breathe.** You may be nervous so you have a lot of adrenalin flowing so you're talking fast and your throat closes up and your voice gets high and strangled and... breathe. As Bob Walsh says, "breathing is the antidote to adrenalin." Take full, slow breaths. Breathe.
- ◆ **Speak Loudly Clearly and Slowly.** Once you are breathing, think about how to use your voice to present the information best. You can change volume, tone, rhythm, pitch –all of which can help you emphasize your key points. Make sure that your listeners can hear you, or you will lose them. Equally important, by projecting your voice you project your interest and excitement in the subject, which allows the audience to share these. You are almost certainly speaking more quickly and quietly than you realize, so do not be afraid to slow down and crank up the volume.
- ◆ **Keep striving for eye contact** when you are giving your talk. You cannot share your enthusiasm and knowledge with the audience if you are looking at your notes or looking at the board or looking at your computer, nor can you draw strength from their interest and excitement unless you are looking at them. And you cannot get a read on how well they understand the talk unless you look at them.
- ◆ **Make sure that all of your visual aids support your cause** rather than compete with it. If you have too much text on a slide, you may be tempted to read it verbatim (which is not very effective), or your audience may be tempted to read it (in which case they won't be listening to you). Words on slides are there in order to emphasize what you think is important, where you are, or where you are going – to highlight key points – not to deliver all of your content. Please use large text in your PowerPoint or Acrobat presentations (I often use 30-50 point type). Keep the number of words per slide to a minimum.
- ◆ **Practice projecting** all of your slides and images well ahead of time, so that you are certain that they say what you expect them to say and that they work as you hope.
- ◆ Remember, **a few slides are useful; a lot become a burden** (if you have too many, you can't do them or the rest of your talk justice).

- ◆ Also, **if you present a visual aid such as a graph, chart, table, or even a word slide, try not to skip over it** without discussing it. If you are not going to discuss it, don't put it up there. And if it cannot be read, don't put it up.
- ◆ Finally, a couple of more tips from Bob Walsh. Stay present: if you make a mistake, let it go and keep on moving. Everyone makes mistakes—so just focus on what is in front of you. Rehearse...out loud (rehearse = “re-hear”). This helps you understand how your talk will sound to others and allows you to adjust as needed.

Okay, so you may be nervous. You will rarely find an audience that isn't eager to support you, and this audience will be very supportive, so you might as well have a good time. Enjoy yourself, and they will enjoy themselves.