

COUNSELLING SERVICES:
Personal Development and Performance Enhancement

PRESENTING REPORTS AND ESSAYS

From time to time you will probably have to give a talk or read a paper in one of your classes. Remember that even experienced speakers get nervous; you can make your nervous energy work for you rather than against you by (i) thorough preparation, and (ii) really making an effort to communicate with the people you are speaking to through your manner of presentation.

PREPARATION

In some cases you are simply asked to read in class an essay or paper you have written before handing it in. In this case all you need to concern yourself with is the way you read it. (See "Presentation" below).

At other times you may be asked just to give a talk, the text of which will not be handed in, or to give a talk and then at a later date (after you have written it up) submit a written version of the talk in the form of an essay. In these cases, consider the following points about your preparation:

Format:

The most effective talks are usually made from detailed notes rather than a complete word-for-word text. However, if you feel unable to speak from detailed notes, you should feel free to write it all out.

Basic Parts of the Talk:

- (1) **Introduction.** As in an essay, this tells why your topic is important and sets your topic in a context (how does it relate to other aspects of the subject or the course generally?) and explains what you intend to talk about. List the various parts of the topic you have chosen. Try to engage the interest of your listeners.
- (2) **Body.** This will be the largest section. Here you develop the announced topic, and go into all the necessary detail.
- (3) **Conclusion.** A summary of the main points made in the body is useful here. You might suggest broader implications of the topic you haven't touched on, and indicate that they would provide interesting subjects for the class to discuss. You can mention specific aspects of the subject on which you would be interested in hearing the opinions of others, or which still puzzle you. You can suggest specific areas which you may not have explained clearly enough and invite questions on them.

Topic:

Deciding on the specific topic for your talk may be a gradual process, in which you gather ideas by thinking and reading around the subject, then choose your ground and start to organize your notes. Be careful, however, that you do not choose too large a topic. It is surprising how little you can cover adequately in, say, 15 minutes. (If you're not sure how long you are expected to speak, ask your instructor or tutor.)

Helping Your Listeners:

An important difference between written and spoken communication is that when speaking you need to help the listener along more emphatically in several ways than when writing:

- (1) **Restatement.** Repeat things in different words. This gives your audience more time to grasp the point.
- (2) **Listing.** If you have several sections that are parallel or which go together, number them. Tell your audience: "The first cause of this is...", "The second cause is ..."
- (3) **Summaries.** Every so often, explain how far we have come in the argument or explanation by summarizing what has been covered so far.
- (4) **Connective transitions.** These enable your audience to move mentally with you from one point to the next. Otherwise, they will become confused. Tell them where you are going and how this next section relates to the one before (and to the subject as a whole).

For instance, "Now that we understand the problem that faced the engineer, let's see how he solved it." Or, "Since we know the history of this movement, let's attempt to identify its underlying causes."

Statistics:

Make sparing use of statistics, etc., since they are harder to take in by ear than by eye. A very few interesting facts and examples are better than a whole mass. Try to use examples that your audience can easily visualize. If you need to present material which is hard to convey in words alone, use visual aids. In most classroom situations this means using the blackboard. Make sure you know in advance exactly what you are going to put on the board (perhaps you can even get it on the board before your talk). Another solution is to hand out some copies of your quotations, tables, etc.

Practice:

Practice your talk exactly as you are going to give it (see "Presentation" below). Go through it as many times as you need in order to feel easy with it. Pay careful attention to timing. Most people find that it takes longer to give their talk than they had expected. Time yourself, and adjust your material until you have a talk of the right length. This practicing should be done well in advance of the talk itself -- try to spread it over a couple of days. Don't leave it until the last minute.

If you re going to talk with only minimal notes or no notes at all, then you should at least write down an outline of your talk that you can follow. Go through the whole thing until you find it easy to remember everything you have to say.

PRESENTATION

The main problems that most people have with practical delivery are the result of shyness: going too fast, speaking too softly, not looking at your audience. Such talks are difficult to listen to. To avoid problems with presentations:

1. **Go slowly:** You can vary the pace of course, and slow right down for crucial things while speeding up on anecdotes, examples, etc. but make a conscious effort to go more slowly than seems natural. Most inexperienced speakers go much too fast.
2. **Don't be afraid to PAUSE:** Wait at the end of sentences and sections. If you lose your place, or can't think of a word, wait until you find it. If you don't look uncomfortable, no one else will feel uncomfortable. Try to stop yourself filling pauses with "um...", "er...", and so on.
3. **Speak up:** Make sure everyone can hear you clearly. Speak too loudly rather than too softly. Try to sound confident rather than hesitant or tentative. Avoid using the tone of voice at the end of sentences which seems to turn everything you say into a question -- as if you were expecting someone to say "Yes, Good, Go on".
4. **Look at your audience:** Whether you are sitting or standing, reading an essay or talking from notes, look your listeners in the eyes as much as possible. If you find this difficult, concentrate at first on one person or group, and then branch out to take everybody in. Look at everybody periodically. Eye contact is very important.
5. **Talk to the audience:** Don't address your remarks just or mainly to the professor, tutor, etc.
6. **Gestures and movement:** Nervousness usually makes you want to move around a lot. Keep your hands from doing too much distracting fluttering about, and don't fiddle with things. If you are standing, stand up straight most of the time, with your weight on both feet. You can walk around a bit in a relaxed way, but don't shuffle about aimlessly. You might occasionally lean on a desk, etc. but don't do it most of the time.

7. **Appear interested and concerned in what you are saying:** If it doesn't seem to interest you, it won't interest anyone else. Emphasize what you think is important. Whatever the subject, make it your aim to keep the audience with you all the time.
8. **Be responsive to your audience:** Make minor adjustments in your planned talk where necessary -- e.g. by going over something again if people look confused or puzzled. If you are maintaining proper eye contact you should also find yourself being stimulated by attentive looks from your listeners.
9. **If you are reading an essay:** Be alert to the danger of making it sound just like a reading. Try to make it sound like a talk -- slow down, look at your audience as much as possible, speak with emphasis. Compensate for the fact that written communication differs from spoken by adding impromptu comments of your own -- background information, extra examples of details, restatements of the point you just made, etc. -- before going on with your text.
10. **Nervousness:** The best antidote is thorough preparation and practice. Immediately before your talk try relaxation -- sitting down, closing your eyes, and relaxing each part of your body in turn. If your anxiety is really incapacitating you, talking about it with a sympathetic friend may help you to decide whether you really have any good cause to feel that way.