How To Make An Effective Oral Essay, Research Paper

Often in your career you will be faced with the prospect of giving an oral presentation. If you’re able to express yourself clearly and forcefully when you need to, you will undoubtedly have an advantage over your contemporaries. The objective of this paper is to identify some of the basic concepts involved in the preparation and delivery of an effective oral presentation.

If you have nothing to say, you cannot give an effective talk. Assuming that you do have something to say, it is important to identify at the outset just what it is that you are trying to communicate. Write down a short list of important points or objectives that you want to make (no more than 3 or 4). Your entire presentation should focus on presenting these objectives in a clear and convincing way without making your presentation overly complex, as this will only overwhelm the audience. To be effective, your presentation must be delivered at a level that is appropriate for your audience. You must analyze the background and expectations of the audience to deliver the key points in the most effective manner possible. This could involve modifying the objectives, if the concepts involved are beyond the level of your audience. Ideally, you will have enough knowledge of the subject matter to be somewhat conversational. This means that you should understand your subject well, and be able to answer related questions. On the other hand, it is impossible for any one speaker to be able to answer all questions that might be asked. There is no shame in answering “I don’t know” to a question that is asked, in fact, this answer is preferable to an incorrect or misleading reply.

You should find out how long you are required to speak, and aim to have your presentation fit within the allotted time. One good way to judge the presentation time is to rehearse your presentation ahead of time. Another method is to count slides; if you know your average rate of going through the slides, this can work quite well. It is suggested to practice your presentation at least once before a friendly (or simulated unfriendly) audience a couple of days before your presentation. Talking to a mirror can also help, but even better is a tape recorder, since you can play it back and hear yourself as others will hear you. This way, you will be able to monitor your volume, voice inflection, and overall verbal enthusiasm.

An effective way to emphasize your objective is to repeat it several times during your presentation, without seeming repetitious, of course. This can be accomplished by presenting an outline of your talk at the beginning. The outline almost always contains some type of introduction as the first point. Whether the audience is a group of experts in the field or a group of novices, all audiences require some type of introduction to your topic. Such an introduction will attempt to place the subject of the talk into a wider context; it will also sometimes review some of the background material needed to understand the presentation. For an audience of non-experts, the introduction may take up as much as half the time of the speech. Always start with what you know the audience knows, to make them comfortable at the beginning. The points of the outline should be organized in logical fashion, so that point 2 flows logically from point 1, point 3 from point 2, and so forth. Try to plan the presentation with an easy-to-follow story line.

Once you have placed the subject of your talk into the proper context and have reviewed the necessary background material, it is time to convey the essence of each of the points in your presentation in an effective manner. A useful rule of thumb is to use a new slide for the presentation of each new idea, or argument. It is important not to crowd too many ideas onto a slide as this inhibits understanding. Text is best presented in bullet form. Try for the maximum impact with the fewest words, like newspaper headlines. If you write complete sentences, you will likely recite them to the audience word for word, tuning your audience off completely. Using bullet form on your slides, you can elaborate verbally without distracting your audience from your main message. Try summarizing each slide on a single line, like in a title block at the top of the slide, followed by a few brief, supporting ideas (if necessary). This will allow audience members with wandering attention spans to “recalibrate” themselves with your presentation.

Many effective presentations can be made with hand-printed slides. The advantages of hand-printed slides are that they can be prepared fairly quickly, and without specialized equipment. The main disadvantage is that you have to be extremely neat. If you cannot print neatly, then this method is not for you. Another disadvantage of the hand-printing method is that you might give your audience the impression that you did not have time to prepare adequately. Computer-generated slides can be prepared using your favorite word-processing package or presentation software (i.e., PowerPoint). Just remember to use a large font (14 point-size or larger); avoid too many font changes; and use simple, easy to read fonts for headings and labels. Finally, don’t forget that you can always “cut-and-paste” the different elements of a slide, each of which can be generated fairly easily.

Try not to be nervous or intimidated by your audience. Give the appearance of calm confidence, and focus all your energy and concentration on the message in your presentation. If you are focused on your talk and not your nervousness, your audience will be as well. Some inexperienced speakers will attempt to memorize their talk, or read it from a prepared text. Do not do this. If you need to refer to a set of notes put them in bullet form, not in complete sentences, or you will find yourself reading them out. The best method is to use your overheads or slides as visual cues as to the points you would like to make. If you keep each slide simple (one idea to a slide), nothing will be forgotten.

At the start, determine the best place to stand so that you are not blocking the projection or somebody’s view. When placing a slide on the overhead, make sure that you look back at the screen to see that all is visible, and adjust the slide if necessary. It is best to point at the screen, if possible, rather than at the projector. Unless it is fixed in place, a projector can move if you get too friendly with it. If you must point at the projector (if the screen is too far away, for example) be sure to keep the pointer steady. Aim to speak slowly and with enough volume to reach the person in the audience who is farthest away. Look around and you can see whether your points are sinking in. Interact with the audience. Ask them if they are following you, or ask them simple questions to see if they are. Liven them up a bit. Take control of the questions, during or after the talk. Take discussions off-line if they are consuming too much time or will not readily be resolved. Try to steer the topic back on track if needed, otherwise audience participation can drive things far away from the main points of the talk. Feel free to interrupt debates among audience members; after all, it is your presentation. Humor can make a big difference, especially in dry technical talks. Cartoons can be an effective way to draw parallels with points you are trying to make. Even short verbal digressions, rhetorical questions, or anecdotes can go a long way to keeping up audience interest.

At the end of your presentation, it is a good idea to recap the primary objective. The usual way to do this is to provide a summary slide, with the objectives clearly shown in point form. This summary will usually conclude your presentation. If appropriate, you can invite the audience to ask questions at this point.

an effective presentation takes a lot of effort, and more than a little experience. Don’t get discouraged if your oratory ability is found lacking your first time out. Take suggestions made by your audience, and try to improve for next time. Soon you will be an expert in the preparation and delivery of effective oral presentations.

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