

Communications Seminar Series

Now You're Talking! Bringing Scientific Presentations to Life

Center For Faculty Development & Diversity

November 7, 2008

This packet contains the following handouts:

- Presentation as Dialogue: Tips on Delivery
- Article: “Why Are So Many Scientific Talks So Dull? Do They Have To Be That Way?”
- ESL: Ensuring Comprehension
- Tips For Facilitating Question And Answer Sessions
- Helpful Websites For Public Speaking and Oral Presentations in the Sciences

Elizabeth Appleby, Presentation Skills Coaching
eappleby@comcast.net

Delivery: Presentation as Dialogue

- Everyone feels nervous before an oral presentation. You are definitely not alone! Rather than thinking of your presentation as a solo performance, try to see it as a *Dialogue*, a *connection* between you and your audience.
- From the moment you enter the room or begin to speak, you are connecting with your audience. This means that you need to speak *to* them and make eye contact *with* them. They will *respond* by taking notes, nodding their heads, or perhaps asking a question. Try to keep this connection going throughout your presentation.
- Even if you memorize some of your presentation, try not to recite it. Practice it at home, pausing to renew your contact with your audience.
- Before you enter the room try to take a “moment before” in which you remind yourself of your goal. For example, you are walking into the room in order *to teach* or *to clarify* your research for your audience. Having an active goal which involves your listeners can help lessen your anxiety.

Body Language: Continuing the Dialogue

- There is no such thing as the “right” way to move. Your goal is to move as normally as possible. That, of course, is difficult when you’re nervous. Therefore, remind yourself to stand up straight and don’t forget to *breathe*. Remember, you connect to others with your entire self, not just your words.
- If possible, do a brief physical warmup in order to relax. This can be a brisk five-minute walk in the hallway.
- Try to become aware of and eliminate distracting movements such as fidgeting with your hands or clothing.
- If possible, visit the room where you’ll be speaking before you give your presentation. Walk around in it, practicing aloud. Knowing the setup of the room will help you feel like you belong there.

Voice

- Remember, you are having an exchange with your listeners. Therefore, make sure they can hear you all the way at the back of the room.
- Even though you’re nervous, make an effort not to speak too fast. If English is not your native language, slowing down is particularly important.
- To emphasize key phrases or terminology, speak a little louder and slower. Using a *rising intonation* will also add emphasis.

Why Are So Many Scientific Talks So Dull? Do They Have To Be that Way?

by D. Eric Walters, Ph.D.

When you attend a conference or a seminar, what is the probability that very good science will be presented in a very dull way? Unfortunately, this happens too often.

Why are so many scientific talks so dull? There are several reasons. First, science has a very strong written tradition. You are expected to write your results in such a way that others can reproduce them. You are expected to give sufficient data to support your conclusions. If you over interpret your results, others will discover this and your reputation will suffer. Data and detail are highly valued; hype is not. Therefore, scientists tend to be cautious and monotone in presenting their results, and they are thorough in showing the data. This can lead to extremely unexciting presentations, with overly complicated graphs, tables and diagrams.

There is another reason. Most of us do not get much formal instruction in oral presentation in the course of our scientific training. It simply is not considered as important as doing the science and writing the papers. Only later do we discover that our speaking skills can have a tremendous influence on the course of our careers.

Do they have to be that way? No, of course not. We can all improve our presentation skills. First, we must realize that oral presentations serve a role much different from our written work. Papers and books are the place to present all of the experimental procedures, details, and data. The oral presentation is the place to *tell the story* of your research. The story describes the circumstances and thought processes that led you to do the work, highlights the frustrations you and your colleagues experienced along the way, and conveys your elation when you succeeded. Most important, an oral presentation is your chance to share with others why you find your topic interesting. Be sure to share your enthusiasm with your audience. This helps the listeners to connect with what you are saying.

The oral presentation is *not* the place to tell everything you know about your subject. It is a good idea to decide in advance what will be the key message you want listeners to recall long after the talk is over. If you can state that key message in a single clear sentence, you will have a foundation on which to organize your talk. Your presentation will have a clear focus.

There are other ways to improve as well. Visual aids (slides, overheads, PowerPoint presentations, and others) are usually better if they contain a few key words in a large font than if they become a script which you read to the audience. They can read faster than you can speak. If you put the whole story on the screen, they will read rather than listen. On the other hand, if you just give them a few key words, they will *know* just enough about what you are talking about to desire to *listen* to what you have to say about it.

Practice and experience are helpful as well. Look for opportunities to speak, and enlist colleagues to give you constructive feedback about your presentations. Rehearse often if you have to give an important presentation, so that you will stay within the time limit and will feel comfortable with your talk.

Eric Walters is Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at The Chicago Medical School (www.finchcms.edu/biochem/walters.html). He and his wife Gale, a food scientist, are the authors of *Scientists Must Speak: Bringing Presentations to Life*. He has been a member of The Science Advisory Board since January 1998.

<http://www.scienceboard.net/community/perspectives.46.html>

ESL: Ensuring Comprehension:

- If English is not your native language, do not worry about being perfect! Your audience does not expect perfection.
- Instead, your goal is to make your presentation *easily understandable* to your audience. Focusing on the following will help:
 1. *Verb Tenses*: Review your presentation to make sure you have clearly indicated whether an event is occurring in the past, the present, or the future.
 2. *Articles: (a, an, the, some)*: Go over your presentation to be sure that you have included articles. Their absence can be distracting for listeners, while their presence adds precision.
 3. *Plurals*: Like the use of articles, distinguishing between the singular and the plural provides specificity and clarity.
 4. *Pronunciation*: a.) English is a stress-timed language. This means that some syllables take longer to say—i.e., receive more *stress*—than others. This pattern of alternating stresses is what gives English its particular *rhythm*. Try to incorporate English rhythm into your pronunciation. This will help an audience understand you far more than if you spend your energy on mastering each individual sound. b.) *Terminology*--Check with a native speaker to be sure you are stressing the correct syllables.
 5. *Discourse markers*: These are words that indicate the nature of the relationship between sentences or sections of a presentation. They provide essential guideposts for your audience and prevent confusion. Examples of discourse markers are *consequently, therefore, contrarily, conversely, moreover, subsequently*.

Transitions/Connectors: (Use Cause/Effect, and maybe three other categories with about four examples in each

Tips for Facilitating Question and Answer Sessions:

- Try to anticipate likely questions and formulate possible responses before you present.
- When rehearsing your presentation, practice your question and answer session, too, so that you will have practice articulating responses to likely questions.
- Establish a time limit and inform your audience of the length when you begin the question and answer session.
- Restate each question clearly. This helps you clarify the question, ensures that the entire audience hears the question, and gives you a moment to consider your response.
- Direct your response to the entire audience to maintain everybody's attention.
- 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, offer to get back to the questioner with an answer
- Do not allow one person to dominate the question and answer session. Try to maintain momentum to sustain the interest of your audience, which can easily be lost if only one audience member is participating.
- Prepare a concluding statement to indicate the end of the question and answer session and to reinforce the main points of your presentation.

Adapted from *The Finishing Touch: Tips for Facilitating Question and Answer Sessions*

<http://www.cfsph.iastate.edu/TrainTheTrainer/pdfs/FinishingPs.pdf>

Helpful Websites

Public Speaking Anxiety

- University of Wisconsin Counseling Center, Self-Help Resources “Public Speaking Anxiety”
<http://www.uwstout.edu/counsel/selfhelp/speechanxiety.html>
- University of Tennessee-Martin, Counseling and Career Services
“Public Speaking Anxiety” by Louise Katz, Ph.D
<http://www.utm.edu/staff/ccenter/counseling/publicspeakinganxiety.html>

ORAL PRESENTATIONS IN THE SCIENCES

- “Effective Presentations”

An On-Line Tutorial Series through the University of Kansas Medical School

<http://www.kumc.edu/SAH/OTEd/jradel/effective.html>

- “How *Not* to Give a Scientific Talk”

By Michael De Robertis, Professor of Astronomy at York University

<http://www.casca.ca/ecass/issues/2002-js/features/dirobertis/talk.html>

- “Oral Presentation:”

Advice from Mark D. Hill, Professor of Computer Sciences and Electrical and Computer Engineering at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

<http://pages.cs.wisc.edu/~markhill/conference-talk.html>

GENERAL PUBLIC SPEAKING SKILLS

- “Designing Effective Oral Presentations”

The Rice University On-line Writing Lab

http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~riceowl/oral_presentations.

- “Improve your Communication Skills”

MindTools.com

<http://www.mindtools.com/page8.html>

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eappleby@comcast.net