

Common Pitfalls Associated with Presenting

Adapted from Indiana University's "Improving Lecturing Skills: Some Insights From Speech Communication" URL: <http://www.indiana.edu/~teaching/allabout/pubs/lectskills.shtml>

To acknowledge that good presentations can allow us to accomplish many goals is important. But, even good presenters can make many mistakes. Some particular problem areas involve:

1. **Trying to Cover Too Much Material**

It is simply impossible to say everything that ought to be said during a presentation, however, many presenters cannot accept that truth. They set forth, then, to be as complete and comprehensive as possible in their presentation.

- Limit your material to only explaining the key points of that subject.

2. **Failing to Prepare**

Most instructors have devoted many years of their lives to learning, thinking about, and doing research related to the subjects they teach. Thus, they are very well informed, but being an expert on a subject does not insure that one can teach it to others effectively. Each of us can think of professors we have known who had great minds but who were miserable teachers.

- Knowledge is the foundation of effective lecturing, but, other preparatory steps are essential.

3. **Being Perceived as Disorganized or Unclear**

The notion of "perception" here is very important. Even if a lecture is logically organized from the instructor's point of view, if students fail to perceive its organization or clarity, they soon will feel lost and frustrated. Research has shown that listeners tend to perceive speakers as disorganized if:

- They cannot identify the main ideas.
- No summaries are used (including previews, internal summaries, and final summaries.
- Transitions are weak or nonexistent.
- The organizational pattern is too complex to follow.
- Not only are disorganized speakers perceived as less credible, but listeners have great difficulty learning from presentations they perceive as poorly organized.

4. **Inadvertently Encouraging Audience Passivity**

Most individuals who attend a presentation assume that their role is passive (i.e., sit back, relax, and just listen). Unfortunately, most presenters assume the same. However, this passivity typically results in the audience becoming disengaged intellectually. Studies show that most people's attention lapses after ten minutes of passive listening (Wolvin, 1983). To extend students' attention spans, consider doing the following:

- Ask questions at strategic points or ask for comments or opinions about the subject.
- Play devil's advocate or invite individuals to challenge your point of view
- Ask audience to discuss with their neighbor a point just made.
- Introduce visual aids: slides, charts, graphs, videotapes, and films.

5. Ignoring Student Feedback

Much of this problem is related to the "cover the book" syndrome, combined with a measure of rigidity. The presenter who believes that he/she must cover 14 key points during a given lecture is not likely to welcome audience questions or requests to slow down. In fact, the presenter may prefer to focus on his/her lecture notes and to ignore more subtle cues that the audience is having problems understanding. Much feedback expressing boredom, confusion, or frustration is communicated non-verbally. Thus, unless the presenter is attentive to such cues and actively responds to them, he/she will lose the audience during the presentation.

- Watch your audience and make the necessary adjustments (suggested in #4 above).

6. Failing to Formulate Good Examples

In any communication situation, examples are needed to clarify, to bring ideas to life, and to make the general specific. Colorful examples are memorable. Some research suggests that listeners use their memory of examples to reconstruct key ideas. Thus, not only can compelling examples make one's presentation clearer and more vivid; they can also assist the audience in recalling important ideas. Unfortunately, it takes time and effort to find or formulate good examples. Many presenters fail to do so, hoping instead that examples will come to them spontaneously as they present. Often, this is not the case.

- Prepare your examples (e.g., illustrations, stories, case histories) well in advance.

7. Distracting or Poor Delivery

Whenever any speaker's delivery or presentation style calls attention to itself, it serves as a source of distraction. If anyone is counting the number of times the presenter says "you know" are not learning very much about the content being addressed. The list of poor delivery qualities is quite extensive. It includes (but is by no means limited to): speaking in a monotone, looking or sounding bored, using vocalized pauses, talking too rapidly, hiding behind the podium, reading lecture notes, failing to use reinforcing gestures, and playing with objects (such as glasses, pencils, or jewelry). Most presenters will never have flawless delivery, but whenever their delivery becomes the source of audience boredom, distraction, or ridicule, a problem must be acknowledged.

- One of the best techniques to correct these distractions is to videotape yourself giving a presentation.
- Have a friend or colleague observe your presentation and supply you with feedback.

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