

10 tips for speaking to an audience

<https://www.student.unsw.edu.au/speaking-audience>

1. Practice, practice, practice

Rehearsal is essential to speaking well. It will help you keep to a time limit and will allow you to try out various techniques in a low-pressure environment. It will also help you to know your material well, which makes it easier to remember and stay on point. Practice standing and speaking so that you get used to delivering a talk before you have to give it to your audience.

2. Speak, don't read

Don't simply read your talk, word-for-word, from a paper. This gets pretty boring for listeners. Spoken language is less formal and wordy than written language, so reading makes you sound stiff and will dampen any sense of energy or spontaneity in your performance. Reading from a paper forces you to look down, instead of speaking to the audience. Instead, if you have a 'script', turn it into notes that you can talk from, and glance at only occasionally. It's less important that you capture the text word for word than that you present the main ideas in a natural and relaxed way (this is where rehearsing helps - it not only improves your performance skills, it enables you to better remember what you want to say).

3. Be yourself

Even in a formal speech, allow your personality to come through. When you're nervous, it's easy to tense up and become a little awkward or wooden, but make an effort to stay natural. Smile and make eye contact. You will establish better rapport and credibility if you are being yourself, and your audience will listen more if they can see you as genuine, even if it means being a little less technically perfect.

4. Aim for a positive state of mind and a confident attitude

Try to project confidence, even if you don't feel it. Remind yourself that you can do it, and that the audience want you to succeed. Visualise a positive outcome. Harness your nervous energy and tell yourself that you are excited - that you have interesting, engaging materials to share with the audience. As you walk to the front of the room, carry yourself in a confident manner. Stand straight, look at the group, take a breath, and smile. Concentrate on what you will tell the audience, rather than your degree of nervousness. This will help you forget your nerves and focus on your topic and your listeners, so you'll be better able to get them engaged in your speech.

5. Use verbal signposting

Giving an indication of what will be coming later in your talk is an effective way of maintaining audience interest. Use transitions to draw your audience a 'road map' of your presentation. For example:

"In a moment I'll provide some interesting examples, but first ..."

"There are four ways of preventing this. Firstly - secondly - thirdly - finally"

You can also link ideas or sections of your presentation to help your audience follow the overall structure:

"As I mentioned earlier, the first method was unsuccessful ..."

6. Use examples, illustrations and humour

Use examples or verbal illustrations to create interest. Choose them to suit your audience. An example that comes within their experience of the audience can create interest, a humorous remark can 'break the ice' and establish rapport, especially early on.

7. Ask questions and invite participation

Asking questions of your audience throughout your talk helps hold their attention and interest. It also develops a connection between you and the group. Asking questions means you are inviting them to participate and drawing them in to a mutual thinking process. For example:

"Who can estimate the number of individuals left permanently injured by road accidents?"

"Can anyone suggest some alternative uses for plastic bubble wrap?"

"Someone's home is broken into every seven minutes. Can you believe it?"

You can also speak directly to individual audience members, if appropriate. For example:

"I take it from your reaction that you've read something similar, Sarah . . ."

8. Be aware of eye contact and body language

Make eye contact with the audience to help establish a connection. Glance at the faces of group members and don't be afraid to meet people's eyes, but don't stare - use the 3-second method. Look straight into the eyes of an audience member for 3 seconds at a time. Aim for direct eye contact with a number of people, and every now and then glance at the whole group while speaking. Eye contact not only establishes a bond, it can help you register your progress. Faces can indicate interest, confusion and boredom, so you can gauge reactions to what is being said.

Body language is also important. Standing, walking or moving about with appropriate hand gesture or facial expression is far preferable to sitting down or standing still with head down and reading from a paper. Use audio-visual aids or props for enhancement if appropriate and necessary.

9. Learn from the Pros

A great way to learn what good speakers do is to watch them give speeches, note what works and what doesn't, and adopt these examples into your own style. Note which lecturers are particularly interesting - attend class and watch what they do. Watch some TED Talks online. They tend to be high-quality presentations and provide some great examples.

10. Be aware of technique

Pace

Speaking to an audience requires a pace slower than normal conversation. Nervous speakers tend to speed up, so avoid this. Try varying your pace to create different effects. Try: slow measured speech for a point which is serious or needs emphasising speeding up a little to lend excitement or urgency

Pitch

Aim for a comfortable, medium pitch. High-pitched voices can sound harsh, and a high pitch is often due to shallow breathing and nervousness. Deep, steady breathing and a deliberate attempt to lower the pitch will help reduce nerves. Variations in pitch can be effective. For example, pitch could be raised to add emphasis to a question. However, use with care; too frequent use of high pitch can irritate an audience.

Tone

Tone is the vocal quality which expresses feeling. It can lend warmth and sincerity to your voice or reveal how strongly you feel about a topic. This can evoke a similar response from the audience. In academic presentations, a harshly critical or judgemental tone should be avoided.

Volume

Your voice should be loud enough for the listeners in the back rows to hear comfortably. You can also vary volume to make your talk more lively, but avoid shouting.

Pausing

Inexperienced speakers are often afraid to pause; they see pausing as a failure in fluency, but experienced speakers use pauses to good effect. Pausing can focus attention on what has been said or what is about to be said, can also allow the audience to digest information, or can be used to prepare them for a change in ideas.