

Writing the Text

Write (or key) the text of your talk regardless of whether you are presenting informally or formally. Great speakers make presenting information seem effortless, but that is rarely the case. Advanced preparation and planning, including writing out the text of the talk and practicing the speech, are keys to success.

Assembling your presentation will be easier once you have planned using the suggestions in Chapter 1, “Planning and Organizing.” Begin thinking about the text of your presentation by becoming thoroughly familiar with your topic and what is expected of you as a speaker. If you have not done so, complete the appropriate exercises in Chapter 1, particularly the form for brainstorming and choosing key ideas. You may also want to outline your talk under the headings Introduction, Main Body, and Conclusion.

DEFINE YOUR TOPIC

If you have been assigned a topic or subject area, be sure you are clear about what the event organizers (or whoever asked you to present) want from you. If you have not been given a topic or specifics about a subject area, decide on a topic best suited to your audience. If need be, run your topic past the organizers to ensure it is acceptable.

Focus on the topic and keep reinforcing it throughout your presentation.

CHOOSE A FEW KEY POINTS

After determining the central theme of your presentation, choose a few key points to support the topic, as discussed in Chapter 1. You may have a lot to cover, but you cannot hold your audience’s attention for hours on end. Focus on what is important to them.

How do you decide what to include in your presentation? Base everything on your topic and purpose. From that, decide why this specific audience came to hear you speak. Ask yourself, “What is the most important thing for my audience to know?” Repeat the question, asking what is the second (and third and fourth) thing that is important for your audience to know.

Key points should include information you were asked to deliver as well as information you feel is crucial to understanding your subject. Always provide correct, relevant, up-to-date information.

Keep key points to a minimum. You will not want to overwhelm your audience, confuse them, or cause them to cease listening to you. If you deliver excessive points you refer to as key material, it devalues the overall information. Listeners may lose sight of what specifically they should remember. Naturally, you will be presenting what you consider to be important information throughout the presentation, but *key* indicates that particular fact is central to the entire talk. Capture the essence of your talk in three to five points.

Arrange your key points in a logical sequence, and then fully discuss one point before moving on to another. Talk about all supporting information and materials that belong with a particular point when discussing it.

Exercise: Choose Key Points for Your Presentation

When you are next called upon to give a presentation, write down three to five key points to cover along with the information you will use to support each point.

1. Key point _____

Supporting information _____

2. Key point _____

Supporting information _____

3. Key point _____

Supporting information _____

4. Key point _____

Supporting information _____

5. Key point _____

Supporting information _____

STRUCTURE YOUR PRESENTATION

How can you best engage your audience? By considering your particular topic and your specific audience, you can develop an interesting presentation. Not all information lends itself to the same type of presentation or to the same group of people. For instance, slides of animal pictures might be appropriate for animal lovers, the local zoo employees, or children. However, those slides would not be appropriate for the CEOs of companies. The same is true for content. A serious subject would be treated differently from a

lighthearted theme complete with joking and laughing. Tailor the presentation and your delivery to the topic and audience. (Additional information on tailoring a presentation is detailed later in this chapter and in Chapter 6, “Focusing on Your Audience.”)

All presentations are structured with an introduction, middle (body of the talk), and conclusion. However, what is included in each section and how the information in those sections is arranged may differ.

Ask yourself the following questions to determine an appropriate structure for your presentation.

- ◆ What is your topic, and have you thoroughly researched it?
- ◆ What format would best suit your audience (straight lecture, discussion, hands-on or other type of audience participation, and so on)?
- ◆ Will you use visual aids?
- ◆ Will you use examples, samples, or stories?
- ◆ Will you present in a formal or informal setting?
- ◆ How much time will you devote to the introduction, the main body, and the conclusion?
- ◆ Will you have a question-and-answer session following the presentation?
- ◆ Will the audience be able to interact with you during the presentation (questions, discussion, exercises, and so on)?
- ◆ What will the audience gain from, learn from, or do with the material presented?

Once you create a central topic, you can branch out from there and decide how many key points are necessary and what approach you should take to delivering them.

Introduction

Use the introduction to capture your audience’s attention. If you do not grab the audience members’ attention with your opening sentences, you will have a difficult or impossible time getting them to concentrate on the rest of the presentation.

Begin by connecting with the audience. If you have not been introduced by a host, introduce yourself and give a brief bio. Describe your background and why it qualifies you to present. If you have something in common with the audience, mention it. Keep your introduction brief.

How can you best relate to the audience? Make it personal by building rapport with your listeners through openers that include anecdotes, questions, statistics, personal experiences, relevant stories, or appropriate jokes personalized for them. Show the audience you have something in common with them.

Introduce your topic by telling the audience what you are going to talk about during the presentation. Let them know exactly what they can expect to hear and how they will benefit by listening to you.

Example for the Introduction of a Stress Management Presentation

Stress affects all of us. Today’s presentation will focus on how you can live a healthier life by controlling your stress through proven techniques. Stress can be positive or negative, and its effects can be mentally or physically damaging. I will talk about the types of stress you might encounter as well as its causes. I will discuss the effects stress has on the body and mind and then suggest possible ways for managing it.

Middle

Use the middle of your presentation to deliver the substance of your topic. Your entire talk should be developed around this message. Introduce key points, and keep reminding the audience of the benefits of your message to them.

Stick to your topic. If you do not deliver the talk people came to hear, they may walk away disappointed and irritated. Provide information in a logical format, emphasizing the most important facts. Tailor your talk to the audience, using appropriate terminology and examples. If you can relate your talk to what the audience already knows, they may have an easier time grasping the concept.

Check your facts for accuracy, and have sufficient supporting evidence to defend your key points. Provide up-to-date, well-researched information and, if applicable, visuals and handouts that complement your talk. You may want to have a few questions on hand to ask your audience throughout the presentation to spark their interest and keep them attentive. Providing an opportunity for the audience to text questions to be answered at the end of a presentation is a great way to involve a younger audience.

Although the middle of your talk comprises the majority of your presentation, keep your message clear and brief. You will lose your audience with a long, boring speech that makes it difficult for them to focus. Pace yourself so you do not run over the allotted time. Allow sufficient time for a question-and-answer session.

Example for the Body of a Stress Management Presentation

I will now discuss the effects stress has on the body mentally and physically, give reasons for wanting to control your stress, and provide a number of tips for managing stress. (The speaker should then proceed to discuss this information in detail and use visuals if appropriate.)

Conclusion

Be conscious of your time and know when to stop talking. Allow time to summarize your presentation and reiterate key points. Tie everything together, and let your audience know what you expect them to do when you finish your presentation—buy a product, solve a problem, feel motivated, and so forth. Draw a strong conclusion that will inspire your audience to take the action you prefer. Provide an appropriate recap of the talk. Tell your audience what action you want them to take.

Make the conclusion satisfying for the audience by telling them what they learned or what they gained by listening to you.

Example of the Conclusion of a Stress Management Presentation

To recap what we’ve learned, you can alleviate stress by doing the following: (Here the speaker should reiterate a few top stress-busting techniques he talked about in the presentation.)

Question-and-Answer Period

Welcome questions from a participating audience. If time and format permit, take questions during the presentation. When fitting, add a question-and-answer period at the end of your talk. Be sure to allow enough time during the planning stage of your presentation to accommodate the questions and your response to them.

Listen attentively to questions and comments to be certain you understand what is being asked. If you are not clear, ask for clarification. Repeat the question before you give your answer so everyone can hear it.

Answer questions thoroughly, but relevantly, by focusing on the specific question asked. Do not go off on a tangent unrelated to the question. The question-and-answer period is not the time to continue your lecture, but an opportunity to clarify a question in a listener’s mind. Rambling will not only confuse the person asking but also the audience.

If you do not know the answer to a question, be honest. Offer to find out the answer if possible. By thoroughly researching your topic before the presentation and gathering more facts than you need, you will likely have sufficient information to answer a variety of questions. Remember, you are the expert on the subject.

Complete the following checklist.

Checklist for Structuring Your Presentation	Yes	No
Is your topic clear?		
Have you researched enough information to support your presentation?		
Do you have an attention-grabbing opener?		
Have you prepared three to five key points for the main body of your talk?		
Do you have sufficient, viable information related to your key points to sustain your presentation?		
Is your information presented in a logical order?		
Do you have sufficient sources and information to support your main points?		
Have you prepared appropriate visuals, examples, samples, and so on?		
Did you plan for interaction with the audience?		
Did you allow time for a question-and-answer discussion?		
Do you have a strong conclusion that will encourage your audience to take appropriate action?		
Does your conclusion summarize what the audience has learned?		
Does your conclusion include the takeaway for the audience?		
Is your conclusion likely to get the audience to act or react the way you desire?		

You should have answered yes to each item in the checklist. Work toward correcting any negative answers.

USE APPROPRIATE WORDS AND LANGUAGE

Select the appropriate words for your particular audience. (Chapter 6 details audience focus.) For instance, language appropriate for an adult may not be understood by elementary students. Technical terms suitable for colleagues in your field may not be fully understood by the general public. Avoid jargon and technical words that may be unfamiliar to your audience. Use easy-to-understand words and uncomplicated sentences.

To be convincing and have a positive effect on your audience, avoid negative words and statements. Instead of telling the audience what *not* to do, tell them what they *should* do. Rather than say, “Do not eat unhealthy foods,” say, “Eat healthy foods.” Instead of saying, “I’m not sure,” try, “I will find out for you.” Turn “I can’t” into “Here’s what I can do.”

If you are trying to persuade your audience or move them to take action, use direct language so they know exactly what you mean and what you expect of them. If you have a request, ask. If you want listeners to buy your products, tell them. If you want your department to increase sales, advise them of the percentage or amount of growth you expect, and then explain how to accomplish the task. Some speakers talk all around their requests but never quite tell people what they should do. Ask if people understand what they should do and how to do it or if they need clarification.

Eliminate slang and poor speech habits such as saying, “ah,” “um,” “you know,” and the like, which detract from your message and performance. Speak proper grammar, and work at increasing your vocabulary. Speakers with an excellent command of language have a greater impact on their listeners. However, take care not to speak above your listener’s understanding. If they need a dictionary to interpret your words, people will stop listening. Check your pronunciations, especially with proper names.

Be mindful of audience members who are not proficient in the language you speak. If you will be speaking to an international audience, you will have to research the language and customs of that country and perhaps arrange for an interpreter.

Write out a succinct, clear message based on your key points, and practice speaking it out loud.

Exercise: Structure Your Presentation

Complete the following exercise when you want to plan your next presentation.

Presentation topic _____

Introduction: Attention grabber (anecdote, question, statistic, joke, and so on) _____

Middle: Key points to cover

1.
2.
3.
4.

5. _____

Conclusion: Reiterate key points and call audience to action _____

TAILOR YOUR PRESENTATION

Your audience is the main consideration for your presentation. Aim to please your audience by tailoring your presentation to those individuals. What worked in a former speech may or may not work again, depending on the audience. For instance, a stress management presentation for a group of daycare workers would have a different spin than one for a group of financial advisors. Although the basic information might be the same, these two very different audiences would be looking for specific help for their particular situations. Daycare workers may want to know how to keep calm around screaming, crying children. The financial advisors may want to know how to relax after dealing with disgruntled clients all day. Use examples and visuals that relate to the specific audience you are addressing. Begin planning early so you are not rushed or tempted to recycle old material that does not suit.

Ask yourself:

- ◆ What is the purpose of my presentation?
- ◆ What will I communicate?
- ◆ Who is my audience?

- ◆ Will my message be of interest to this audience?
- ◆ How can I tailor my message for this event?
- ◆ Can I build on what the audience knows about my topic?
- ◆ What questions or exercises would get my audience involved in the presentation?
- ◆ How will I approach this presentation?
- ◆ What examples and visuals would fit this specific presentation?
- ◆ Am I using easy-to-understand language for this presentation?
- ◆ Is my language positive?
- ◆ Have I limited my ideas to a few key points geared to this presentation?
- ◆ What action do I want my audience to take?
- ◆ If I am using notes from a former presentation, how can I tailor them to this particular talk?
- ◆ How can I update my notes and visual aids, including handouts, to fit this presentation?

Another consideration is the size of the audience and the venue. Speaking to an informal group of three or four in an office or conference room is different from addressing an audience of hundreds in a convention center. Also, formal meetings call for a different approach than informal ones.

Ask yourself these questions:

- ◆ How large is my audience?
- ◆ What is the setting for the presentation?
- ◆ Is this a formal or informal presentation?

Complete the following checklist.

Checklist for Tailoring My Presentation	Yes	No
What is the purpose of my presentation?		
Have I tailored my presentation for this particular speech and event?		
Will my audience understand my topic?		
Can I build on what my audience knows about my subject?		
Can I build and maintain interest in my presentation?		
Did I factor in ways to involve my audience in my presentation?		
Do I know specifically what I want my audience to take away from this presentation?		
Do I have questions and examples for this particular presentation?		
Have I used easy-to-understand language?		
Have I considered the different learning styles of my audience?		

Checklist for Tailoring My Presentation	Yes	No
Is my information credible?		
Have I thought about appealing visuals for this particular presentation?		
Is my language appropriate for this audience?		
Is my language positive?		
If I am using notes and visuals from former presentations, have I updated them?		

You should have answered yes to each item in the checklist. Work toward correcting any negative answers.

Exercise: Tailor a Presentation

Plan your next presentation by completing the following:

Topic _____

What is the purpose of this presentation? _____

What can I do to build this presentation around the audience’s knowledge of this topic? _____

Have I used language my audience can relate to and understand? _____
Will my audience be receptive to my information and the way it is presented? _____
Have I constructed my presentation in a way that fits this particular event and venue? _____

What stories and exercises will I use to construct an interesting presentation? _____

How will I approach this presentation (lecture, visuals, hands-on, and so on)? _____

These are the main points to remember about this presentation.

What visual aids are best suited to this presentation? _____

What handouts are best suited to this presentation? _____