



Book It's Not What You Say, It's How You Say It

Joan Detz
St. Martin's Press, 2000

Recommendation

This extremely practical, highly focused book goes through the hands-on details of preparing a presentation or speech. Some of the instructions seem self-evident, but only because author Joan Detz is extremely thorough and recognizes that it is easy to forget these "obvious" tips under pressure. She provides a vast amount of practical information, far more than anyone could absorb at once, but her tips are worth reading again and again. She also includes good self-assessment forms and questionnaires. Many of these venerable public-speaking concepts date back to the Sermon on the Mount, but Detz adds her own spin by emphasizing that the focus should be on the speaker, not on slides or props (downplay the loaves and fishes). The book's power resides in its completeness; Detz seems to have thought of everything, and that is reassuring. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to anyone who must make presentations in public, under any circumstances.

Take-Aways

- Once you have chosen the right message, you must craft a presentation targeted to your targeted audience.
- Choose the right format for your message, be it a meeting, a speech, an e-mail, a personal appearance or even silence.
- Organize your presentation clearly or you will lose your audience.
- Thorough research - including factual background, anecdotes, dates and historical references - will punch up your speech.
- To become a better speaker, get to know yourself, your speaking style and your strengths and weaknesses.
- Good preparation is vital for a good speech, so rehearse with notes.
- Take charge of your environment and prepare for interruptions.
- Good timing is essential for effective communication.
- Get to know your audience in advance and tailor your speech to them.
- After your speech, review your performance and look for ways to improve.

Summary

What You Say

Before you can prepare a speech, or focus on your speaking skills, you have to have something valuable to say. You need a message. Ask yourself these questions:

- What do your listeners want to hear?
- What knowledge and misconceptions do they have on this topic?
- What problems do they face and what solutions have they tried?
- What message would comfort them or trouble them?
- What messages would they welcome or resent?
- How can you save them time or money?
- What can you say to them that no one else could say as well?

How You Say It

Start by choosing the best communications option for conveying your message to your targeted audience, be it a face-to-face meeting, fax, report, voice mail or e-mail, op-ed article, public appearance or even silence. If a public presentation is the right tactic, analyze the situation to determine how long your talk should be. If you are on a program, you may be assigned a time slot, but a good speech does more than just fill its allotted time. Consider the setting and the agenda, including what happens before and after you speak. Consider the complexity of your material and leave time for handouts and questions.

“The more you say, the less people remember.”

Make sure your listeners can understand how you’ve organized your material. Popular formats include problem solving, compare and contrast or some kind of logical order, be it geographic, numerical, alphabetical, chronological or by priority. Open with something strong and specific. Make your first point quickly. Don’t open with a joke, because nothing is worse than a joke that falls flat. Closing is easier - most audiences welcome any wrap-up.

“The best ad libs are the ones you’ve planned.”

Good research improves any speech. If you present statistics, make them more interesting by simplifying them and putting them in perspective, that is, in human terms. Make them concrete, such as "this would save you minutes a day" or "that’s enough money to hire people." But research means more than statistics. You can refer to anniversaries, historical references, cartoons, community issues, news stories, folk tales and almost anything else that ties in with the subject, group, time or place of your talk. Audiences absorb information better and remember it longer if it’s presented in story form.

“When I have been able to persuade my clients to ditch their slides, invariably they have given their best presentations.”

To improve your speechwriting skills, be sure to read your speech aloud. Print out a hard copy; don’t try to edit or proofread on the screen. Make your words, paragraphs and sentences short; they’ll be easier to deliver. Avoid commas, which go with run-on sentences. Try to include some questions and quotations to break things up. Look for places to use dynamic verbs instead of just "is," "are," "was" and "were." Don’t throw in unnecessary phrases. For example, say, "This improves our bottom line" instead of "This is a way to improve our bottom line." In general, use vivid words. Search your document for negative words such as "not," or "none." When you find them, try to rewrite them out. Avoid qualifiers like, "I believe." Cut jargon and redundancy.

“Don’t skimp on the thought process that goes into a good outline.”

Audio-visual support is popular but often counterproductive. Consider skipping the slides or film. If you use them, don’t use too many, and keep the words and numbers on the slides to a minimum. Stand stage right of the screen. Never read what’s on the screen. The slides should compliment your talk, not repeat it. Use a remote control; it’s annoying to keep saying, "next slide." Open and close without AV support to keep the focus on you. Audiences like handouts, but be sure to have plenty for everyone and leave time to distribute them. Never ask the audience to do it.

“Speakers never get a second chance. The audience either ’gets it’ the first time or they don’t get it at all.”

Choose clothes that fit comfortably and compliment the occasion. Avoid fabrics that wrinkle easily. Take care of basic needs before you speak. Use the bathroom. Make sure there's water at the lectern. Keep a cough drop in your pocket, just in case. Remember to act confident and you'll actually learn to be more confident. You'll probably be most nervous at the outset. Make your opening lines clear and crisp to help you settle down.

“The more experienced you get at giving presentations, the less you will rely on statistics, and the more you will use other options.”

Prepare for the unexpected by having some "ad lib" one liners prepared. Be ready to succeed: prepare for applause. Pause, acknowledge it and move on just as it starts to subside. Plan for interruptions, including pagers and cell phones. Locate the exits, in case of a fire alarm.

Body language is important, so try to do these things: Stand straight and tall. Gesture with your full arm and match the gesture to the mood and language naturally. Use an open hand; don't make a fist. Smile. Stand at a slight angle to the audience. Make eye contact with as many individuals in the audience as possible. This builds trust and reinforces your key points. It will also make you more confident and less nervous. Go without a microphone if you can. Listen to the other speakers to hear how the sound system is working. If you misspeak, as everyone does, offer a short, clean correction.

“‘Winging it’ is the surest road to feeling nervous.”

You can speak with or without notes, or use an outline or full manuscript. Accomplished speakers often do well without notes, though you may be likelier to be nervous if you don't have them. When you prepare your notes, use large type, leave wide margins and number each page or card. Don't staple them. Underline or highlight key points. Carefully time your presentation. A full manuscript gives you the advantage of knowing exactly how long your presentation is and assures you of being thorough and using precise, powerful wording. The manuscript itself conveys authority and an air of professionalism. But, don't just stand there and read it; use it as a reference and make eye contact with your audience. If you rely on notes or a manuscript when you practice, be sure to bring them with you!

“In proofreading, a touch of paranoia can prove to be a career asset.”

Proofread all your materials very carefully, including slides. Rehearse thoroughly and carefully. Rehearse in the actual presentation room if you can. Try recording your speech and then listen to the tape. Get to know your own voice. If you have poor voice quality, you can improve it by working with a professional coach. Props can help give the audience something to look at and can give you something to do with your hands, but don't give them too much attention. Humor is a great tool, but avoid jokes. Try analogies, word plays or a self-deprecating touch. After the presentation, stay professional. Don't start chatting while the event is going on.

“There are really only two times to say anything: the right time and the wrong time.”

With certain kinds of speeches, such as eulogies, you need to prepare for the chance you'll get emotional. Plan breaks into your presentation. Pause as soon as you feel tears coming. Prepare simple positive remarks that can redirect your listeners if they're tearing up. Adjust the schedule or format if necessary. Consider taping your message in advance. Halt for a few minutes if you need to calm down. "If your tears turn into sobs and you want to stop, you stop. There's no law that says you have to finish."

When You Say It

Timing is everything. If you say the right thing at the right time, you have communication power. If you say the right thing at the wrong time, you miss opportunities. Consider the time of day you'll be speaking. Will your listeners be tired? Hungry? Eager to leave? Will they need a coffee or a bathroom break?

“Find out who you're talking to and what they want to hear from you. Don't make assumptions about what they need: ask.”

Sometimes the timing of your speech turns out to be bad, for reasons beyond your control. Don't complain; just get through it. Sometimes it may be better to just wait. Saying "no" is difficult, although you can find various ways to say it politely but firmly. Saying

you're sorry can help assuage hard feelings and your own guilt. If in doubt, apologize, and do it as quickly as you can. Apologize even if the other person didn't notice your mistake. Don't make excuses, but correct any errors. If you are running late, keep running. Do not be a no-show.

Where You Say It

Your job includes figuring out the best place to present your message. Prepare the room. Check the temperature, the lectern, the seating and the room size. Close off doors and windows as needed.

“Good speakers keep getting better by learning from others, taking some risks and welcoming new ideas for improvement. In short, good speakers keep learning.”

Speaking outdoors is especially difficult. Consider plans for bad weather. Make sure there's enough seating. How will you get the audience's attention? Will there be an amplifier? Beware of background noise.

Who You Say It To

It's important to have the right speaker for the right message. Make an honest self-assessment about how you appear to audiences. Do they like you? Learn about your audience. Ask your colleagues if they've addressed this group. Find out:

- What was their experience?
- How often does this group meet?
- Who spoke at their last meeting?
- Who's speaking in the future?
- How big will your audience be?
- What is their age range, ethnic and gender mix, educational background and area of expertise?
- Do they have any special problems or issues?
- Will there be any notable members in the audience, or notable absences?

“When audiences are looking forward to hearing you, they really don't like a cancellation. They expect you to be there. If you can't come, they expect a really good excuse.”

To involve your audience, use "you" statements, such as, "you can win by..." or "you know what will happen if." Invite audience members to write questions on cards, answer questions by a show of hands, swap business cards or work in pairs.

Who Else Could Say it For You?

Emergencies arise, and sometimes you have to find someone to serve as a substitute speaker when you cannot appear. Find a sub yourself - don't dump it back on the organization. Look for someone with good platform skills, someone you and the audience trust. Don't cancel lightly or you'll offend those who invited you.

“It's important to be introduced the way you want, and the only way to get this kind of an intro is to write it yourself.”

Someone else will introduce you, but they can use your words. Write your introduction and give it to the person introducing you. Make sure you know the names of the other panelists if you are on a panel, and be sure they know yours. Ask to speak first, so you can set the tone.

Was Your Speech a Success?

After each speech, ask yourself how you could be better next time. Get feedback from your audience. Watch and listen to other speakers. Keep trying to improve. Get to know your speaking personality and style. Under what circumstances are you especially successful as a speaker? How do you want audiences to perceive you? Identify your strengths and build on them. Keep clear of negative thoughts.

Professional coaches can help you. You may want a professional coach if the occasion is very important, the audience is influential, the media will be there, the presentation could boost your career or you want immediate results. When hiring a coach, make sure to ask who will do the actual coaching, check the coach’s experience and talk to other clients.

You can find help and resources for your speech in many unexpected places. Look for books of quotations, proverbs and anecdotes. Refer to specialized books of quotations regarding the government, military, religion, sports and more. Books of birthdays and anniversaries can provide time references. Books of quotable definitions can add humor. Collections of great speeches are a useful reference. Collected toasts will also help.

Useful professional organizations include the American Library Association, the International Association of Business Communicators, National Storytelling Network, Public Relations Society of America and Toastmasters International. Many of these societies have Web sites as well.

About the Author

Joan Detz Detz is a professional speech coach who conducts communications seminars for major corporations and advises prominent executives across the United States. She is the author of *How to Write & Give a Speech* and *Can You Say a Few Words?*
