

Professor Mark Davis of Macalester College created this Useful Flyer of Information (part of a series of “UFIs”), inspired by Reader’s Digest founder Dewitt Wallace.

HOW TO GIVE AN ORAL PRESENTATION

There are few abilities that will benefit you more than good communication skills. Being able to give an effective oral presentation will be a tremendous asset for you no matter what you do following graduation from Macalester.

To some extent oral communication skills reflect an individual's personality. While it is helpful to pay attention to how others present themselves orally, it is usually not a good idea to try to copy someone else's style. What works for someone else, may not work for you. Nevertheless, although there is no single surefire method to give an effective oral presentation, there are a few guiding principles that one should follow.

Know Your Audience. Know your audience! Know your audience! Know your audience! Did you get that? Without a doubt, the most important thing to keep in mind when preparing an oral presentation is who will be listening to it. Will it be a group of peers, a class of high school students, your church congregation, experts in the field? For you to be effective, you need to target your talk to your audience. How much will they already know about your subject? What aspects of your subject will they be most interested in? If you talk over the audience's head, you will lose them. If you tell them what they already know, you will lose them. If you focus your talk on things in which they are not interested, you will lose them. There are lots of ways to lose your audience. If you do not consider your audience when you are preparing your presentation, you will almost certainly find one of those ways.

Generate Momentum. Nothing will lose an audience quicker than a talk that does not seem to be going anywhere. A listener needs to feel some momentum when listening to a presentation. A presentation should have a clear start, a middle, and an ending, and the listener should always feel that progress is being made along this path. It is not always necessary to describe your path explicitly to the listener (e.g., ‘first I will explain this, then I will compare this, and finally...’). However, you need to provide the listener with periodic road signs. Examples of road signs are comments such as: ‘To answer these questions, we conducted the following experiment’, ‘We have several interpretations of our findings’, ‘In conclusion’. Such comments indicate to the listener that the talk is about to move another step along the path. Moreover, they actually tell the listener what the next section of the talk is going to be about.

Be Animated. As speaker, it is your job to create a sense of energy in the room. If you are not interested or excited in what you are talking about, at least pretend that you are. You can be sure that few in the audience will pay you much attention if you seem bored by your own presentation. Without a doubt, an animated speaker will have an easier time capturing and holding the audience's attention. Vary your inflection, the loudness of your voice, the length of your pauses. A relentless monotone is a sure to promote daydreaming among your audience.

Also, some dos: speak clearly, keep an eye on the clock, practice your talk ahead of time, be responsive to the audience (if you sense they are starting to lose interest, move along quickly to the next section), **and some don'ts:** don't read your talk (although referring to notes is fine), don't talk too fast, don't speak too softly or tentatively. **And finally,** try to have fun. Yes, believe it or not, engaging an audience with some new information, a new perspective, perhaps with a few jokes interspersed, can be a very enjoyable experience. Good luck!!