ORAL PRESENTATION

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Every scientist is called upon now and again to speak to others. The range of topics can be very wide, from a specialized subject matter e.g. an account of recent research findings to his peers, to a discourse on a wider scientific plane to a general audience.

Not all of us are endowed with oratorical skills and few enjoy this role of delivering an oral address. But there are certain guide-lines that, if followed, will make a presentation vastly better, and will make the task of the speaker easier. Some of these procedures may appear very elementary and obvious, but so often the presentation is marred by the oversight of some detail that could so easily have been avoided if this was considered during preparation or delivery.

To start at a very early stage, when a request is received to present a paper or talk - it may only be to a small committee - or a decision has been made to present a paper at a professional conference or symposium.

It is important, even at this early stage, to obtain certain information:

1. Date, time, and place of presentation
2. Time allowed for the delivery
3. Subject matter
4. Names and subjects of other speakers
5. Size and general description of audience
6. Effort required in time and money e.g. are proceedings to be published ?
7. Visual aids equipment available
8. Deadlines for receipt of paper or abstract by organizers

The next step is to consider in more detail the subject matter - its scope and limitations. This must be done in relation to:

1. Composition of the audience. This will affect:

   terminology; with a specialized audience, it saves time and avoids irritation to make use of scientific terms with specific meanings, but these terms should not be used or only after defining them when the audience is general.

   depth of explanation;

   examples and anecdotes used to emphasise or explain important points; and

   complexity or simplicity of graphics.

2. Specific purpose of the presentation. This will be clear if answers can be supplied to the following questions:

   What does the listener want to know?

   Is the listener expected to take action? If so, what action?

   How is the listener expected to react - confident, aroused, encouraged, frightened, relieved, inspired?

   Is a solution being offered to a problem?

   Are questions, suggestions, or replies expected from the audience?

   Will the audience be persuaded to accept a course of action?

   Will an attempt be made to inform the audience?

With this background information, ideas can be assembled by pursuing in sequence the following steps:

Jotting down ideas as may come

Eliminating - repetitions
- vague ideas
- unrelated ideas

Discriminating - make rough outline of key ideas

Classifying - search out subordinate ideas

Placing ideas in sequence, arranging them in a logical order

Fortifying and amplifying ideas with graphics
- determine what to chart
- decide on how to chart

Including homely examples to explain abstruse points.

The next step is to prepare ideas for oral delivery, and to consider how to make ideas attractive, forceful, and easy to comprehend. The time-proven form consists of an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

Introduction. The audience has come prepared to listen. It will be attentive at first - contact must be made at the outset and maintained throughout.

Transition between introduction and body. The audience must be motivated by giving good reasons why each listener should heed and weigh each message as meant for him.

Body of the talk. The main points can now be made and elaborated and this can be achieved by making them clear and palatable for the audience, and by illustrating verbally and graphically by examples, case histories, the typical incident, the representative sample.

Conclusion. The end should have a purpose. It may be:

to activate audience to take a course of action

to summarize the main message - repetition aids retention

to stimulate questions and discussion

The visual aid, properly used, can greatly enhance the effectiveness of an oral presentation. It has been proved time and again that visual aids substantially increase retention of information by an audience.

To communicate facts, figures and ideas most effectively, a visual presentation should be employed. But the graphic must have something that is worth saying to someone worthy of hearing it to warrant the time and effort required to prepare it.

An oral presentation has got to march along. Graphics must be changed frequently, and must not be visible if no longer relevant. Only information to be conveyed at that moment should be included on the same graphic, as otherwise the audience's attention will be diverted from the immediate issue being discussed. Visual communication is dealt in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Finally, the text must be reduced to an outline form. A text should not be read to an audience except in very exceptional circumstances, and certainly not memorized. It is better to work in ideas and explain them in your own words of the minute.

The outlined text or notes should be typed or printed in triple space. The notes should be neat, with no cross-outs, wandering arrows or complicated marginal notes. Where it is advisable to pause for effect or to make a break between one idea and another, a mark in the notes would help to remind the speaker. Mnemonic devices (e.g. colour coding) are also useful as aids to indicate the sequence of ideas to be presented and to keep tag of timing.

Both the graphics and notes should be studied beforehand for hidden implications that may have been missed when planning.

Most importantly, presentation should be practised as an integrated whole; the audio and visual will be presented together and must be learned together.

It is not uncommon these days to be expected to make use of a public address system. Speakers often regard microphones

with considerable passion - they either fight with them, or regard them as objects to be caressed. Others ignore them entirely, regarding them as unnecessary gadgets. Public address systems are there for a purpose - to make the speaker heard by all the audience, without undue strain on the part of the speaker or the audience.

Microphones are very sensitive and heavy breathing, sniffing, coughing, sneezing, and handling should be avoided. Care should also be taken with notes as the crackling of paper is picked up and amplified.

The speaker should talk quite normally about fifteen inches from the microphone, which should be adjusted to the level of the mouth (and switched off during adjustment).

It is now becoming common to use microphones slung around the neck or clamped to the speaker's clothing. The microphone is installed and adjusted when switched off, and before beginning to speak. Otherwise the audience can be distracted and lose concentration.

Sometimes, a paper must be read e.g. presidential address, at professional meetings, to avoid omissions, errors, discrepancies or undue emotionalism. There is a difference between a report meant for silent reading and a report meant to be read aloud.

The silent reader can reread a sentence several times for clarity and comprehension and stop to analyse complex sentence structure. In oral delivery, however, a report or paper must be heard and understood by listeners the first time. Sentences must be constructed to be followed easily and comprehended by listeners.

When reading a paper, the speaker should bear in mind to:

1. keep the purpose in mind so as to be aware of the logic of the material,
2. analyse the meaning of the sentence by dividing it into thought groups,
3. emphasise key words by vocal stress,
4. be sure of word meanings and to avoid words with several meanings,
5. avoid verbal booby traps - tongue twisters, and to
6. vary pitch, quality and volume of the voice.

Further Reading List

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