

# Effective Oral Communication

## *Convey Your Thoughts*

### **Introduction**

Part of becoming a more effective communicator requires that you are able to critically evaluate situations. Were the students right in being upset over the quality of Jeff's review session? Why would the students feel the way they did? What steps could the preceptor have taken to change the outcomes? How would you have handled this situation? While right now you may have some ideas as to why Jeff failed as a presenter, this chapter will help you understand in detail where Jeff went wrong.

### **What is Oral Communication?**

At its most basic level, oral communication is the spoken interaction between two or more people. However, what we intend to teach you is that the interaction is far more complex than it seems. Oral communication is composed of multiple elements which, when taken as a whole, result in the success or failure of the interaction. Not everyone is an effective communicator.

In order to function successfully academically and professionally, you need to learn effective oral communication skills. For many, conversational speech comes naturally. However, in more formal speech, effective communication skills are essential. A poorly conducted interview, sales presentation, or legal argument could have ramifications that affect many more people than yourself. By becoming an effective communicator you will be able to conduct yourself in a variety of personal, professional, and academic environments with confidence.

Oral communication is a unique and learned rhetorical skill that requires you to understand what you say and how you say it. Unlike conversational speech, speech in more formal environments does not come naturally. What you will learn is how to critically think about how you present yourself as a speaker in all occasions and then how to function in a variety of speaking environments.

### **Oral Communication Toolkit**

As a speaker there are several elements of oral communication of which you need to be aware in order to learn how to use them to your advantage.

Let's begin with a few rudimentary skills for interacting with your audience:

### ***Eye Contact***

Maintaining eye contact with your audience is the simplest thing you can do to establish a relationship. Eye contact serves many purposes. First, it establishes that the parties are listening. Second, eye contact indicates receptiveness. If a person is not making eye contact, they are less receptive to what you are about to say. Third, eye contact is a basic expressive form. A speaker can learn a lot from the audience by just reading what their eyes are saying.

### ***Body Language***

As a speaker, the messages you send through your body language affect how your audience perceives you. Whether you are interacting one-on-one or with an auditorium of 200 people, the effectiveness of your message is affected by how you carry yourself. For example, when speaking to a large audience, crossing your arms is seen as bad body language. It shows that you, as the speaker, are closed off from the audience, which reflects negatively on your attitude towards the audience and your topic. You want your body language to establish interest and sincerity toward your audience.

### **Using Eye Contact and Body Language Effectively**

- 3 When speaking or being spoken to, make eye contact with your audience. When presenting to a larger group, scan the audience.
- 3 Carry your body in an open manner. Do not close yourself off by crossing your arms or hiding behind a lectern.
- 3 Be careful how you use your hands. When you are not using them place them at your side. Always gesture out and away. You should avoid gesturing with a closed fist as this appears confrontational.
- 3 Observe how other people speak to you. What made them effective or ineffective?

### ***Style and Register***

Your tone and pace of speech affect how your audience responds to you. You want to match your tone to that of your audience. You do not want to come off as arrogant or ignorant. Rather, you need to sound confident at a basic level so that you do not lose credibility with your audience. The pace of your speech is also important. You can speak faster than you can write and understand. You need to give your audience time to take in what you have just said, or you risk losing your audience.

### **Activity 1**

*One of the hardest things for speakers to do is to actually watch themselves speak, but there is no better way to learn. Stand in front of a mirror and give an impromptu speech for 2 to 3 minutes on how to brush your teeth (assume you are presenting to about 5 people). When you have finished, answer the following questions.*

- How often did you find yourself breaking eye contact with yourself?
  
- Did you find yourself “scanning” your audience as you spoke?
  
- How did you carry yourself? What did you do with your hands and arms?
  
- Did you notice yourself stumbling over your words or did you have a comfortable pace?

You should have noticed two things. First of all, you might have been pretty uncomfortable with the entire situation. Secondly, you should have seen how you engaged your “audience.” By making eye contact with members of the audience, you help to bring them into your presentation. If you were not making eye contact with yourself as you spoke, you probably found yourself getting disinterested.

Now let’s examine some more advanced skills of reacting to the audience:

### ***Understanding Your Audience***

Whether you are interacting one-on-one with a friend or coworker or speaking before a large group, understanding your audience is a part of effective communication. Knowing who your audience is allows you to tailor your content. Your audience will have differing levels of knowledge and differing expectations. Take a moment to look at the worksheet to the right. You will be asked to use it in a modified form in just a moment.

### ***Adapting to Your Audience***

Now that you know to whom you are speaking, you need to know how best to address them. You need to determine what level of content and tone are appropriate to your audience. If you are dealing with a person one-on-one, you want to be more personal in your tone and demeanor. If you are speaking before Congress, you want to appear more professional.

### ***Active and Reflective Listening***

Refer back to Chapter Four on effective listening. Pay particular attention to the scenario. As a speaker you should always listen to what your audience has to say, whether it is spoken or not. As a speaker you broadcast a variety of verbal and non-verbal cues, as does your audience. Learning how to read and interpret those cues is part of being a successful communicator.

#### **Who Am I Talking To?!**

Identify your audience: \_\_\_\_\_

Age/ age group: \_\_\_\_\_

Speaking environment: \_\_\_\_\_

Knowledge level of audience: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Specific audience needs: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### **Activity 2**

*You have been asked to give a presentation on how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. However, you will be presenting to three different groups: a group of learning disabled third graders, a group of culinary students, and a group of newly-arrived immigrants with limited English ability. Use the table on the following page to answer the following questions:*

1. What does the audience already know about making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich (PB&J)?
2. How would you gain the audience's attention?
3. How much detail would the audience need to successfully make a PB&J?
4. What other information would be valuable to your audience?
5. How would you present yourself to the audience?

Learning Disabled Third Graders	Culinary Students	Newly-Arrived Immigrants with Limited English Ability

### Oral Communication and Your Preceptorship

As part of your preceptorship you may be giving presentations of various types for your class. You could be conducting an exam review session or giving a mini-lecture in front of your class. No matter the situation, you need to be prepared.

#### Planning Process

##### *Initial Steps*

1. What type of talk is it?

To begin with you need to identify

<b>Initial Planning Worksheet</b>	
My Topic is:	_____
My Audience:	_____
Size of Room:	_____
Time Available:	_____
What topics do I need to cover?	
_____	
_____	
_____	
_____	
_____	

the type of presentation you will be giving. Is it a group discussion? Is it an exam review? Is it a mini-lecture? Each format has differing requirements; a group discussion would be presented very differently from a mini-lecture.

2. Identify your audience

You need to know who your audience is. Refer back to the audience adaptation activity on the previous page. The third-grade learning disabled students had radically differing needs than the culinary students. When leading a discussion or presenting to your class, you should be able to effectively identify your audience. As a member of their classroom you should know what they need.

3. How much time do you have?

Time is your biggest constraint in presenting. As the presenter, you need to make critical decisions at the beginning as to what to include and what not to include. It is better to have time left at the end than to go overtime. If you leave extra time at the end of your presentation, you have time available to field questions and clarify any missed points.

4. Content Expectations

You will need to determine, usually in conjunction with your instructor and/or GTA, what specific content you will need to cover. This is important, as you do not want to disseminate misinformation or confuse your class. Your instructor and GTA are invaluable resources because they are experts on the material.

**Outlining**

There are three primary benefits to outlining:

- First, it provides you, the speaker, with the needed structure and direction to write your presentation. Without it your presentation ends up disjointed and confusing to your audience.
- Second, your outline will help you assess audience comprehension. When you look out at the audience during the presentation and see a sea of dumbfounded faces, you may want to go back and reiterate your previous point.

<b>Beginning Your Outline</b>
Define your central point/thesis: _____ _____
Your main points: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____
Other Content/subject connections: _____ _____
Materials needed: _____

- Finally, your outline helps out the audience. When the content of your presentation is organized into a logical manner, your audience will be better able to follow and understand you.

Think of your outline as the blueprint for your presentation. When preparing a full presentation you will need to plan a detailed outline.

Preparing a group discussion or a review session is different, but you will still want to start with an outline. For a discussion, you want a plan of attack. You need to identify what material you are going to cover and prepare your notes in advance. Take a look at the sample exam review outline in the text box on the next page. It includes all the necessary information you, as a discussion leader, will need: textual and lecture material you and your audience will need to review; and all the relevant concepts that need to be covered.

### ***Visual Aids***

Whether you are leading a discussion or speaking before your entire class, you should consider using visual aids. As a presenter it is your responsibility to reach out to as much of the audience as possible to address the variety of learning styles they may have.

There are a few guidelines to designing your visuals. They should be big, they should be simple, they should be clear, and they should be consistent.

- *Keep them big*

Visibility is very important. You have to remember that the people sitting all the way at the back of the lecture hall need to be able to read your visual aids. Your font size should be large, at least 24 points.

- *Keep them simple*

Many of you have had instructors who place full lecture outlines on the overhead. While it makes sure that nobody misses a point, most students end up copying down the outlines verbatim instead of listening to the instructor. Your visuals should include critical diagrams and tables of data, and key points relevant to your discussion. They should not be detailed lecture outlines.

#### **Exam review for Cooking 101**

**Primary focus:** Sandwich construction theory

**Chapters to review:** Child ch. 3-5, Kerr ch. 1-2, Lagasse ch. 6, Crocker ch. 2 & 7.

**Lectures to review:** 5-8, 10, and 12-14.

**Important Concepts:** bread selection, meat and veggies, dietary concerns (kosher, vegetarian, vegan, bland), storage concerns, pop culture of sandwiches, history of sandwiches (Earl of Sandwich), corporate profile (Subway Subs).

### Visual Aid Checklist

- ✓ Are my bullet points understandable?
- ✓ Are my pictures clearly visible?
- ✓ Do my charts or tables make sense, or would they make sense with a brief explanation?
- ✓ Are my slides visible everywhere in the presentation room?
- ✓ Do my visual aids complement my speech rather than distract from it?

- *Keep them clear*

Your visuals need to be clear. You need to select images that will project well. Usually larger high-resolution images are best. Use simple block style fonts, as they are more readable than script fonts. Additionally, you need to be careful in picking colors when using PowerPoint. Most experts on PowerPoint recommend dark backgrounds with white or yellow text. Remember that some color combinations, such as green and yellow, may not be visible. The text you put on your visuals needs to be quickly understood. If it requires lengthy explanation, then you should reconsider its use.

- *Consistency is key*

Your visuals need to be consistent in format and style. It looks sloppy when visual aids do not have a consistent format. Your audience will respond better when they perceive you as an organized speaker.

Depending on the material in your presentation, you may want to consider working on a demonstration. Especially in the sciences, offering a real-time demonstration of a key principle will help your audience better understand the material.

### *Handouts*

You may also want to consider using handouts as a supplement to your discussion. The same rules apply to handouts as to visual aids. First and foremost, you do not want your audience distracted by your handouts. If you put a full presentation outline in your handouts, your audience will not pay attention because they know what you are going to say. Instead, you may want to include important figures and data that will be useful for your audience to have in front of them.

### *Practice*

In order to ensure a successful presentation, you should practice several times to feel comfortable with the content and delivery of the material. While there is no set rule as to how many times you should practice, it should be at least more than once. While practicing, you should be looking out for material that seems confusing or difficult to deliver. The best feedback that you can get is from yourself. Practice as many times as it takes to make you feel comfortable with the material and your delivery.

*What about stage fright?* For many, giving a speech in front of an audience, no matter how large or small, is an intimidating prospect. The best way to overcome stage fright is **preparation**. The more prepared you are the better your presentation will be.

### **Presenting and Evaluation**

Now that you have prepared and practiced your presentation, here are some practical tips for presenting.

- Arrive early to make sure your presentation equipment works. If you are unsure how to use the equipment, call UAAV Services, 621-3852, to schedule an equipment demonstration.
- Make sure you have all of your materials with you: overheads, PowerPoint, handouts, notes etc.
- Check that the room is set up in a manner that makes it comfortable for you to present.
- While speaking, do not stand behind the lectern for the entire speech; move out from behind it.
- Do not pace across the front of the room. Find a comfortable place to stand and move only to change visuals or when it serves to illustrate a transition.

As part of your presentation you should be prepared to ask and answer questions.

If you have prepared and practiced adequately, your presentation should be successful. Interacting with large groups of people should not be a frightening experience; rather it should be an opportunity for you to sharpen skills that you will use for the rest of your life.

One thing that you may find useful is to have a fellow preceptor or a GTA evaluate your discussion or presentation.

### **Facilitating Discussion and Exam Reviews**

As preceptors, you may be responsible for facilitating discussion groups or running exam reviews. You can apply the above communication skills to great effect in both of these situations. The skills you have developed in preparing in-class presentations can be modified to handle the greater audience interaction demanded by discussion sessions and exam reviews. As you follow the preparation guidelines above, you need to be constantly considering how to involve your audience in the presentation. The goal is to reinforce previously presented material. Since students have heard it in lecture and read it in their readings (both passive learning modes), your goal with your presentation is to engage them more actively. This can be accomplished through the crea-

tion of discussion questions and activities that help students apply the concepts they have learned. For exam reviews, the key is to get the students to do the work for themselves. We will discuss specific strategies for these special types of oral presentations in class.

## Oral Communication for Better Grades

You can use your new prowess in oral communication as a way to improve and increase your participation in discussion sections. Most of your Gen-Ed courses and many of your upper division courses in your major have a discussion section that figures decisively in your grade. One of the benefits of the preceptor program is gaining an insider's look at how your professor or TA grades. Many, though not all, discussion leaders (either professors or TAs) do not keep extensive records on who speaks when in discussion, nor do they note the profundity of the comments offered. For this reason, just speaking up, regardless of the quality of your contribution will usually get you all the notice you need to improve the participation grade. (Although random, off-topic tangents will get you noticed, we don't recommend this method as it is more likely to annoy the TA than get you positive participation points.)

In *Learning Outside the Lines*, Jonathan Mooney and David Cole have come up with a great method to help you contribute to class discussion. Mooney and Cole call it the Three-Sentence Response (TSR). The three-sentence response is based on three skills – paraphrasing, asserting, and questioning. Here is how it works:

- 1) **Wait for the kill.** Pay attention to what is happening in discussion. When someone, either the discussion leader or a fellow student, says something that you have an opinion on (or corresponds with the part of the assignment you actually read), get ready to jump on in. Remember to first clarify what you want to say in your head, then raise your hand.
- 2) **Summarize.** Using the first person, summarize what the previous speaker just said. For example, "I heard you just say that in *Fight Club* it becomes obvious that Brad Pitt and Edward Norton are actually the same character in the scene with Helena Bonham Carter." You have just succeeded in demonstrating that you have been listening, you have reflected back what the previous speaker said, and you have clarified the discussion in case someone had gotten lost or dozed off.
- 3) **Assert and support.** Now you can make your point by using a transition word, something like "however" or "nevertheless," followed by your reasoning. "I heard you just say that in *Fight Club* it becomes obvious that Brad Pitt and Edward Norton are actually the same character in the scene with Helena Bonham Carter. *However*, I think that this is actually apparent in the scene when Norton beats himself up in his boss's office because you see Norton's character begin to act like Tyler."
- 4) **Question.** Follow up these two sentences with a question. Any question will do. You can ask if the class agrees or disagrees. You can even go further and relate it to the bigger picture of the course, i.e. "So what does a movie like *Fight Club* say about our ability to actually perceive 'reality' or identify what is true?"

*Summarize, assert, question.* This three-sentence template will work every time to get your response out there and boost your participation grade. Try it: if it works for you feel free to pass it around and teach it to your peers in the class for which you are a preceptor.

## Summary

Learning how to become an effective communicator will be one of the most valuable skills you can learn. It will help you in your day-to-day personal, academic, and professional life. Knowing that you can effectively speak and present to others will give you the confidence to do well in many spheres of life.

In your role as a preceptor, you will find that being able to understand and communicate with your peers will make your job much easier and rewarding.

## Acknowledgements and References

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