



Presentation Skills for Everyone

(developed and contributed by the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute)

Choosing Your Attire

You should dress professionally for the workshop. Does that mean a suit and tie or a dress? Not necessarily. However, it does mean that you should appear well groomed and neat.

A good rule of thumb is that your attire should be a step above that of the group to whom you are presenting unless you are presenting to an office staff, in which case you should dress in office attire. For example, if you are presenting to a group of manufacturing plant employees, wear comfortable shoes, slacks, and a blouse or shirt and tie.

When in doubt about appropriate attire, take the time to ask the program requester in advance. Some companies have dress codes, and if the presentation site has one, you don't want to violate it.

Overcoming Anxiety

Do your knees feel like spaghetti when you have to get up and speak in front of a group? If you answered, "Yes," then it's safe to assume you have a full-blown case of stage fright.

According to *The Book of Lists*, the fear of speaking in public is the #1 fear of all fears, far ahead of even the fear of dying (#7)! More than 41 percent of people have some fear or anxiety associated with speaking in front of groups. People who have this fear can experience all kinds of symptoms: sweaty palms, accelerated heart rate, memory loss, and even difficulty breathing.

Some of the world's most famous presenters have freely admitted to nervousness and stage fright. Mark Twain said it best: "There are two types of speakers — those that are nervous, and those that are liars."

Feeling some nervousness before giving a speech is natural and healthy. It shows you care about doing well. But, too much nervousness can be detrimental. Here are 10 steps you can take to control your nervousness and make effective, memorable presentations.

- 1. Know the room.** Be familiar with the place in which you will speak. Arrive early, walk around the speaking area, and practice using the microphone and any visual aids.
- 2. Know the audience.** Greet some of the audience members as they arrive. It's easier to speak to a group of friends than to a group of strangers.
- 3. Know the material.** If you're not familiar with your material or if you are uncomfortable with it, your nervousness will increase. Practice your speech. Experts say that proper presentation and rehearsal can help reduce speaking anxiety by as much as 75 percent. Always remember *The 9 "P"s: Prior Proper Preparation Prevents Poor Performance of the Person Putting on the Presentation.*



4. **Relax.** Ease any tension you may have prior to speaking by doing breathing exercises. Proper breathing techniques can further reduce anxiety by another 15 percent.
5. **Visualize yourself giving the speech.** Your mental state can reduce your anxiety by the remaining 10 percent of the equation. Imagine yourself speaking: Your voice is loud, clear and assured. When you visualize yourself as successful, you will be successful.
6. **Realize that people want you to succeed.** Audiences want you to be interesting, stimulating, informative, and entertaining. They don't want you to fail.
7. **Don't apologize.** If you mention your nervousness or apologize for any problems you think you have with your speech, you may be calling the audience's attention to something they hadn't noticed. Keep your concerns to yourself.
8. **Concentrate on the message, not the medium.** Focus your attention away from your own anxieties and toward your message and your audience. Your nervousness will dissipate.
9. **Turn nervousness into positive energy.** Harness your nervous energy. Transform it into vitality and enthusiasm.
10. **Gain experience.** Experience builds confidence, which is the key to effective speaking. Most beginning speakers find their anxieties decrease just that much more with each presentation they complete.

Preparing for the Presentation

Remembering speeches can be a very intimidating experience, especially when the message you are giving is very important. Because the information must be presented consistently, it is a good idea to either memorize your presentation or read from the script.

1. **Memorizing the script.** Memorization is not recommended in general, because too often, people become preoccupied with trying to remember the words to say, and they lose sight of the ideas behind the words or the audience's reactions to what they're saying, meaning their normal voice inflections disappear. When you memorize material, mental blocks become inevitable: It's not a matter of *will* you forget, but rather, of *when*.
2. **Reading from the script.** For this presentation, it is recommended that you read from the script. Here are some suggestions to have a good presentation.
 - Pay attention to the inflection in your voice; to sound natural, rehearse often, and check yourself for pauses. Ask yourself if your words sound the way you would say them if you weren't reading. Tape yourself and listen to your own voice. Take notes where changes should be made with the inflection in your voice.



- When preparing for your presentation, say the script “out loud” on your first run-through so that the script will read closer to your speaking style. This will make it easier to read and much easier to listen to. Make notes in your binder to indicate which words you should emphasize. Numbers are the easiest target words to say slowly and with an emphasis on each syllable.
- One of the biggest problems speakers face when reading text is forgetting to use gestures. Some speakers are so busy reading the text that they fail to communicate with their entire body.

Take the time to add notes or cues in the margins of the script about gestures that should be made and other clues. You'll need to practice using this annotated copy of the presentation script so you can easily and smoothly react to the cues for your gestures while correctly reading the text. This will take some time.

It may help to videotape yourself reading the presentation and then sit and watch the tape, making notes about which gestures you could have used at what points in the presentation. Add notations to the script based upon this review and deliver the speech again, trying this time to add gestures. After a little practice, gesturing and speaking from the script will become second nature.

- When reading speeches, there's a tendency for presenters to maintain less eye contact with the audience. In some cases, people who read speeches have no eye contact. Having the script in upper- and lower-case letters will make it easier to read. Remember to look up from your script periodically and make eye contact with the attendees to keep them engaged.

Use unstapled pages, and take the pages out of your prepared binder before speaking. Paperclip the pages and just before you begin, remove the paper clip. As you prepare your text, keep in mind that you will have to handle these pages, and you will want to do this as smoothly and as quietly as you can.

During your pauses or slide changes, smoothly “slide” the page you just finished using to one side and continue with the text on the next page. Do not pick up the page and place it behind the others or turn it over when done. This will be distracting, and it will bring attention to the fact that you are reading. Avoid handling the pages as much as possible while you are reading.

With a lot of practice and careful presentation, you can deliver a powerful presentation, even when reading. Some of the world's greatest speeches were read when they were first presented. However, you can be assured that they speakers weren't reading them for the first time. Do what they did: practice, practice, practice.



Handling the Question-and-Answer Period

Each presentation will be followed by a question-and-answer period. For some speakers, the question-and-answer period can be the most exciting part of a presentation. For others, it can be their worst nightmare. Here is a five-step approach to handling questions, accompanied by additional tips to help you smooth out the bumps in your question-and-answer periods.

- 1. Listen to the entire question *before* you begin to answer.** Too many people start responding to a question before the entire question is asked. Not waiting to hear the whole question can result in your providing a response that has nothing to do with the actual question. Force yourself to listen to the *entire* question, and make sure you understand the question before attempting to answer it.
- 2. Pause and allow yourself time to evaluate the question.** Repeat the question out loud so the entire audience can hear it. It is important that everyone knows the question; if they don't, the answer you provide may not make sense. Repeating the question will allow you some additional time to evaluate it and formulate a response.
- 3. Credit the person for asking the question.** Say something like, "That was a great question," or "Glad you asked that question," or even, "I get asked that question by many people." One word of caution, though: If you credit one person with asking a question, be sure to credit *everyone* for asking a question. You don't want people to feel their question was not as important as someone else's.
- 4. Respond to the question honestly as well as you can.** If you don't know the answer to a question, don't try to fake it. Be honest, and tell the questioner that you don't know, but you promise to research the answer and let them know...and then, do it.
- 5. Bridge to the next question by asking a question.** "Does that answer your question?" "Is that the kind of information you were looking for?" This is critical. Once the original questioner responds, "Yes," you have permission to go on to the next person. Of course, this also gives questioners the chance to say, "No" and then clarify their questions by asking them differently.
- 6. Keep the question-and-answer session brief.** Too much time spent addressing individual concerns lowers the energy of the larger group. Be ready to end the session when you see the group's common energy start to sag.
- 7. Anticipate questions, and prepare your answers.** Take some time to think about what questions the audience members may have, and to research the answers to any questions you don't know. Then, practice answering those types of questions in advance of the presentation.
- 8. Reinforce key points.** In answering questions, avoid irrelevant tangents and stress important information by referencing key points from your presentation.



- 9. If you don't know the answer, say so.** Don't be afraid to remind the audience that you are not a medical expert. If they ask questions you can't answer and they want immediate answers, refer them to their health care provider or public health information lines, such as 1-800-KARMANOS or the National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service toll-free helpline at 1-800-4 CANCER.

Additional Tips for Handling Questions

- If the audience is relatively large, ask people to stand up when to pose a question. This accomplishes two things: 1) You can more readily identify who is asking the question, and 2) it will be easier for other audience members to hear the question.
- At the beginning of your presentation, encourage people to write down their questions as they occur to them during the presentation so they won't forget what they were going to ask.
- Allow people to pass the questions to you if they feel uncomfortable standing up and asking the question out loud. This gives people who truly want to ask a question but don't want to do it in front of the group an option.
- Always take time to think before you answer each question. Responding too quickly to those questions with which you feel most comfortable will only bring attention to the length of time you take to answer those questions with which you are not familiar.
- Have a pencil and paper ready to write down questions you can't answer, or ask someone to help you by recording the questions on paper you couldn't answer. Be sure to get the questioner's name and phone number or address. Promise to get back to them, and be sure to do so in a timely manner.

Special Audiences

Not every audience will be ideal, and some presentations may have their difficult moments. There may be times when you experience hostile or disruptive individuals, or persons who want to tell their life stories, or audiences that don't the presentation to end.

If you encounter hostile audience members...

- 1. Answer them directly and look straight at the person asking the question.** Give simple answers to simple questions. If the question demands a lengthy response, agree to discuss it later with those who are interested.
- 2. Be friendly, and always keep your temper.** A cool presentation creates an aura of confidence. When the questioner is hostile, respond as if he or she were a friend. Any attempt to put down the questioner with sarcasm will immediately draw the audience's sympathy to the questioner.



3. **Treat two questions from the same person as two separate questions.**
4. **The hostile person is probably looking for recognition.** Give it to them by saying, "That's a good point!" Then, suggest you meet after the presentation to discuss it further.
5. **Do not place your hands on your hips or point at the audience.** These are scolding poses, and using either one of them will give the appearance that you are preaching to the audience or chastising them.
6. **Keep things moving.** There is a rhythm to a good question-and-answer exchange. Successful ones volley back and forth in a brisk manner. Keep your answers brief and to the point so many members of the audience can participate.
7. **Conclude smartly.** Be prepared with some appropriate closing remarks. End with a summary statement that wraps up the essential message you want them to remember.

If you encounter storytellers ("This is what happened to ...")

1. **Redirect them back to the main content of the program.** "I can see you have had quite a number of medical experiences. Let's revisit the topic of prostate cancer screening."
2. **Acknowledge the storyteller's experiences and then get back to the audience.** "Thank you for sharing your experiences. Does anyone else have a question?"
3. **Include the audience in your response.** "Thank you for telling us about your experience. One thing we know is everyone has a different (treatment/doctor/hospital) experience. Let us continue with the program so we can finish on time."
4. **Take the audience out of the response.** "Perhaps you could talk to me after the presentation and, if you have specific questions, I can refer you to the appropriate resource for answers."
5. **Address the concern with resources.** "It sounds like you have a lot of concerns about cancer. Your (doctor/nurse/social worker) is the perfect person to ask for (help/advice). You can also call the national Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER."

If you encounter audience members who are noisy...

1. **Acknowledge the disruptive person(s).** He or she is probably looking for recognition, so give it by saying, "That's a good point." Then, suggest you meet after the presentation to discuss it further.
2. **Always remain focused on the presentation.** When there are several people in the audience talking and/or distracting the group, express concern regarding the presentation. Say, "I want to make sure everyone can hear what I'm saying. Can we bring the focus back to the program?" or, "I'm concerned that the audience is having a hard time hearing."



Can we make sure that only one person is speaking?" or, "I'm wondering whether I have not been clear about something that I have said. Would you like to ask a question?"

If you encounter audience members who don't want to leave...

- 1. Keep track of time.** At times, you will get a lot of questions. But, be mindful of the audience members' schedules. When the presentation time is at an end, close the program by saying, "I'm sorry, but my allotted time is gone and so, I'll have to bring the program to a close. Thank you so much for coming. I'll be happy to stay after and talk individually with anyone who wants to stay" (if this is possible).
- 2. Make the final question the final question.** Prepare the audience for the final question by saying, "I will take two more questions, and then, I'll have to close the program."
- 3. If you don't have time, don't linger.** After you close the program, if you don't have time to answer questions, leave immediately after collecting your program materials.
- 4. Give resources for the remaining questions.** When you run out of time, but audience members still have questions, close the program by saying, "Unfortunately, our time has run out. But, there is a wonderful service that can answer any additional questions you might have. The Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER has information specialists that are always happy to assist by answering your questions, and I encourage you to call them.
- 5. Thank the audience.** "I'm sorry I have to close the program now. You have been a great audience. I would be happy to come again if you'd like me to do so in the future."

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