

Speaking to an Audience

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Experienced speakers use methods to make them more interesting to listen to and to help them hold the attention of their audience. Try some of the following the next time you give a presentation.

Methods to Try

Repetition

Repeating a word, a phrase or an idea is useful for emphasis. For example:

“Physical illness can be caused by fear: fear of failure, fear of other people’s reactions, fear of the unknown. Fear of something which may never happen!”

Verbal Signals

Giving an indication of what will be coming later in your talk is an effective way of maintaining audience interest. Use transitions to draw your audience a ‘road map’ of your talk. For example:

“In a few moments I’ll provide some interesting statistics ...”

“There are four ways of understanding this. Firstly - secondly - thirdly - finally”

“I’ll now provide some evidence and examples to support my last statement.”



Examples & Illustrations

Use examples or verbal illustrations to create interest. Choose your examples to suit your audience. An example that comes within the experience of the audience can create empathy and ‘break the ice’. For example, if you are addressing a group of communications students, it would probably be useless to explain something by comparing it to a complicated scientific process. However, a comparison with the activities of the news media could be much more enlightening.

Asking Questions & Inviting Participation

Asking questions of your audience throughout your talk helps hold their attention and interest. It also develops a connection between you and the audience. Asking questions means your words are not merely being aimed at the audience; you are inviting them to participate and drawing them in to a mutual thinking process. For example:

“Can anyone estimate the number of individuals left permanently injured by road accidents?”

“Who can suggest some alternative uses for plastic bubble wrap?”

“Someone’s home is broken into every seven minutes. Can you believe it?”

Talking Directly to the Audience

If you can make your audience feel like individuals, not just part of an amorphous mass, you will have a much better chance of keeping their interest. For example:

“I see from your reaction that you’ve read something similar, Sarah . . .”

Eye Contact

Make eye contact with your audience to establish a connection. Eye contact involves glancing at the faces of the members of the audience. Don't be afraid to look audience members in the eye, but don't stare continuously; a few seconds is enough.

Eye contact not only establishes a bond, it can register your progress. You can gauge audiences reaction to what is being said by looking at the faces of the audience. Faces can indicate interest, puzzlement, boredom and pleasure. In other words, the faces of the audience are your barometer.

Speaking Well

Effective speaking doesn't only depend on good voice production and articulation. Other factors such as pace, pitch, tone, volume and the use of the pause contribute to good delivery.

Pace

Speaking to an audience requires a pace slower than normal conversation. Pace can be varied to create different effects. Try:

- slow measured speech for a point which is serious or needs emphasising
- faster speaking to lend excitement or urgency

The pace should not be so slow that the audience becomes impatient to hear the next word, or so fast that they can't understand what you are saying.

Pitch

A low-pitched voice is pleasing to the audience and comfortable for the speaker. High-pitched voices can sound harsh and shrill. A high pitch is usually due to shallow breathing and nervousness. Deep, steady breathing and a deliberate attempt to lower the pitch will help you reduce nerves.

Variations in pitch can be effective. For example, pitch could be raised to add emphasis to a question. Variations in pitch should be used carefully, as too frequent use of high pitch can irritate an audience.

Tone

Tone is the vocal quality which expresses feeling. It can lend warmth and sincerity to your voice or reveal how strongly you feel about a topic. This can evoke a similar response from the audience. In academic presentations, a harshly critical or judgemental tone should be avoided.

Volume

High volume or loudness is not the same as shouting. The voice should only be loud enough for those listeners in the back rows to hear comfortably. You can also vary volume to make your talk more lively and interesting.

Pausing

Inexperienced speakers think of a pause as a failure in fluency, and try to avoid any pauses. But experienced speakers use pauses with great effect. Pausing can focus attention on what has been said or what is about to be said, or can be used to prepare the audience for a change in ideas. A pause can also allow your audience to digest what has just been said.

Adapted from: Beisler, F., Scheeres, H., Pinner, D. 1985, *Communication Skills*, Pittman, Melbourne.

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