

Tips for Oral Presentations from Diane Hendrix

(Practice deep breathing (5 mins) before presenting to reduce nervousness. Imagine a receptive audience, interested in your ideas -- which you've practiced and organized.)

- Tell us your central idea at the outset.
- Organize your content into a few engaging points, and preview for your audience.
- Try using a “hook” at the outset: a question you will answer, a passionate quote you remember and will explicate; whatever you can guess will pique interest -- test it!
- Use your hands expressively (not nervously). Find a comfortable posture and (again) practice before friends or a mirror.
- Use eye contact with the audience, as if you're telling each of us, one by one, the “story” you are presenting.
- Assume we are interested, and don't talk too fast.
- Humor helps and relaxes you as well as your audience, if you can manage it.
- You are playing a role here, as an actor does, so you become a kind of official voice or storyteller. Mimic your ideal speaker; imagine the vitality and confidence of a good speaker you've heard.
- Other speaking goals include: Animation in your delivery; Varying your tone, volume and emphasis for points and evidence in your argument.
- Pause (& take a breath) for important ideas you want your audience to pay special attention to. Silence can be effective punctuation.
- Don't be afraid of repetition or of a moment of pregnant silence. Pausing for emphasis can increase your power as a speaker. Pausing after a point or asking a rhetorical question intensifies drama and impact.
- Make a comic aside if appropriate. Add a personal note to drive home a point.
- Use a visual (or prop) to help to clarify ideas – and they definitely will, if you use them well. Words alone are not enough these days. A strong visual to clarify an important idea could be the one thing an audience takes away from your talk. Practice using your visuals (images, graphs, maps, powerpoints—very well organized of course) comfortably. If you are nervous with them, it will be distracting and can siphon off your power. Limit visuals if you must limit something. Use the blackboard, if nothing else. But content and organization are key and should not take a back seat to visuals.
- Don't rush; let us think about what you are saying. Comfortable pacing allows an audience to let your ideas sink in.
- Practice aloud with a couple of friends to sharpen and organize your content. Ask for their feedback, and don't be afraid of their criticism. The more honest they are, the better you will become at this. Practice is critical -- few are “naturals.”
- Be concise and organized. Your goal is to stimulate interest in your points, through a couple of ideas and clear evidence. (Usually students run out of time, showing how little they...practiced -- did I mention that?).
- Plan your conclusion and sum up your ideas with a smile.
- Wait for questions – while maintaining a calm stage presence (pretend!). You'll improve these skills with practice—like doing scales, gaming, driving, whatever.

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