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Practice makes perfect (or, at least better!)

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Practice Makes Perfect (Or, At Least Better!)

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by Paula McMillen

I teach people to use library resources more effectively; however, the skills I’ll talk about below are useful when working with any adult audiences. This is not a comprehensive guide to teaching or public speaking, rather, it is a summary of some of the main ideas and practices that help me.

I used to be so scared when I talked in front of other people — even a small group of people — that I would turn bright red and break out in a sweat. I couldn’t look people in the eye; I read from my notes; I stumbled over my words. I even walked out of an oral exam in graduate school because I was so nervous that my mind went totally blank! Today, however, I am capable of being a good speaker, trainer or teacher in group settings. I say “capable of,” because this still doesn’t come naturally to me. Rather, it is something I have learned how to do well — with the appropriate amount of preparation. I still envy those people who are perfectly comfortable “winging it” in front of an audience. I don’t always think they make the best teachers or trainers, but I would gladly replace my anxiety with their ease. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that if I learned how, anyone can.

Tips and Tricks for Presenters

So, what are the things you can do to become a better speaker? First and foremost: tell people where you’re going to take them, take them there, and then, finally, tell them where you took them. In other words, provide a structure for your presentation which includes a description of what attendees will gain by listening to you. You might frame this as learning objectives, goals or just as an agenda of what you’ll be talking about. Ideally this should be concise, logically presented and visible during your presentation. At the end, always summarize the key points you want your audience to remember.

People teach in a variety of ways, and also learn in a variety of ways. To convey information effectively, utilize a variety of formats to increase the opportunities to tap into various learning styles. You can do this no matter what your natural presentation style is.

Use well-designed visuals to support your points. Visuals should be uncluttered, with no more than three or four points of information. Use large enough print to be seen easily at the back of the room. (This has the added advantage of limiting the amount of information you can include!) Use color, capital letters, a different type or underlining for emphasis. Use graphics whenever possible to address visual learners. For example,
most of us have probably seen or used those overlapping circles to illustrate the concepts of Boolean searching. Visual aids don’t have to be high tech to be effective.

Provide a written as well as a spoken presentation of the most important points. Estimates vary regarding how much of what you say your listeners will actually remember, but the estimates are uniformly low. Give them another opportunity to learn what you’re trying to tell them by providing handouts with the pertinent points, an outline of the presentation or citations to related literature. Handouts should be provided only when needed, otherwise, they become a distraction from your spoken presentation.

Structure your presentation in “chunks.” Pause after each major concept or learning point to check for comprehension. There are a number of ways to do this. You can solicit questions from your audience. You can ask them questions. You can stop to do an activity that utilizes the material you just covered. Don’t wait until the end to see if there are questions. Whatever form these breaks in your presentation are going to take, describe it at the outset, e.g., “I’ll be stopping periodically for questions.”

Practice, Practice, Practice

The single most important thing you can do to be more comfortable with public speaking is to practice. Speaking is a skill, like playing tennis, so with appropriate feedback, you will get better. Standing up and saying out loud what you plan to say has several advantages. You find the words you’re comfortable using to talk about the ideas you want to convey. This language is often different from the language you use to think about, or even write about, those same ideas. This process also helps you be realistic about how much time you are taking. Often we find that we need to pare down the amount of material covered. Don’t talk faster; it’s much better to cover a few points clearly than to race through more information and leave your audience bewildered and confused.

The very best rehearsal is in front of a video camera, which will inevitably reveal a host of nervous mannerisms, verbal and nonverbal, that may distract listeners from your message. Your second best alternative is to rehearse in front of a friend(s) who will provide you constructive but brutally honest feedback. Still effective is to record your presentation with a tape recorder and play it back. You will miss a lot of the nonverbal things, but will hear all the “um’s” and “uh’s.” Try pausing and taking a deep breath when you find you are prone to do this.

Recording yourself is also a good way to see if you speak loudly enough. If you think you’re too soft-spoken, practice once or twice speaking REALLY LOUDLY. If nothing else is available, stand in front of a mirror and talk. Look yourself in the eye and practice using your hands to emphasize important points.

These are just a few practical ideas that will, when used consistently, make you a better speaker. The keys are first to prepare, and then to practice, practice, practice!

Paula McMillen is currently a social sciences librarian at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon. She would like to dedicate this article to Arthur Pellman, who is the best trainer she ever had and who always told such wonderful stories. She can be reached at: paula.mcmillen@orst.edu

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