

Effective oral presentations

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ORAL PRESENTATIONS have more impact than written documents. They allow a richer rapport with the audience, thanks to the very presence of the speaker and the ensuing nonverbal communication (vocal and visual). They also allow a better control of the audience's attention. This potential effectiveness, however, has a price: mobilizing several individuals at a certain time and for a certain duration.

Oral presentations, as a consequence, benefit from following a somewhat different design strategy than written documents. Like documents, they should strive to get messages across. Unlike documents, which support the messages with details, they should support the messages with a convincing delivery. They should thus include less information than documents: because listeners cannot be selective about what they hear, speakers should be. Many speakers just try to say too much. Details, if any, should be presented in a companion document.

PLANNING AN ORAL PRESENTATION proceeds much like planning a written document. One must take distance from the situation and find an answer to the questions *why*, *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*. These questions may have a slightly different slant for a presentation than for a document. The purpose (*why*) focuses again on the audience. It identifies, not what the speaker should achieve, but what the listeners should (be able to) do as a result of attending the presentation. The audience (*who*) is better delimited for an oral presentation than for a written document: it consists of the attendees only. The contents (*what*) should, again, be limited to what serves the purpose and be organized in a way that suits the audience. The speaking conditions (*when* and *where*) provide constraints of time and space. Time involves moment (not only what day, but also what time of day) and duration (how long can I speak). Space regards not only the assigned speaking room, but also the setup of this room for the presentation. Both should be investigated ahead of time and, when possible, be optimized.



Designing the presentation

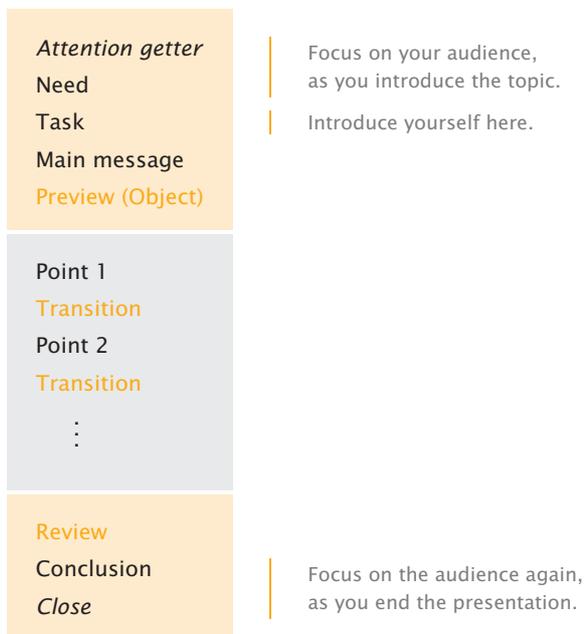
ORAL PRESENTATIONS are intrinsically synchronous. In contrast to written documents, they thus impose both the sequence and the rhythm of presentation: listeners cannot skim or skip parts, listen to the last part first, or go back and listen again to more difficult parts. Moreover, listeners have fewer visual clues about structure than readers.

Oral presentations typically convey one main message only: the sentence that the speaker wants the listeners to remember, were they to remember only one. It should be expressed early in the presentation, but also identified early in the design step, so the body material can be selected exclusively to support it. This approach, building a top-down tree from a main message, helps create a focused presentation, no matter its duration.

Oral presentations usefully comprise three parts. The opening rapidly presents first the motivation, then the main message. By way of motivation, it states the need for the work presented, as a difference between the actual and desired situations, and the task, that is, what the speaker was asked or decided to do to address the need. The body then presents, not all details of the work, but selected evidence in support of the message, structured hierarchically. The closing presents the conclusion, restating—and usually elaborating upon—the main message.

Oral presentations, moreover, can gain considerable impact by starting and ending forcefully, as opposed to hesitantly. The opening must first attract the attention of the audience, as with a usually unexpected, but always relevant statement, question, anecdote, or analogy, leading smoothly to the need. This *attention getter* is the very first impression the speaker makes on the audience, so it must be prepared most carefully. Similarly, the closing should let the audience know in a clear and relevant way that the presentation has come to an end, typically by a change of tone. Such a *close* can simply tie back to the attention getter, to show that the loop has been looped.

Oral presentations should also supply clues to their structure, which is otherwise little visible. They should provide a map, let the audience know regularly where they are on this map, and summarize the material as a form of effective redundancy. The preview, at the end of the opening, prepares the audience for the structure of the body (excluding opening and closing). Transitions both separate and unite the body's main points by clarifying the logic underpinning the structure of the body. They thus indicate to the audience that one point is complete while the next one is about to start, but also that these points are logically linked as they both support the main message. The review, at the beginning of the closing, leads the audience effectively to the conclusion, by recapitulating the material covered in the body. It conveys both contents and structure.

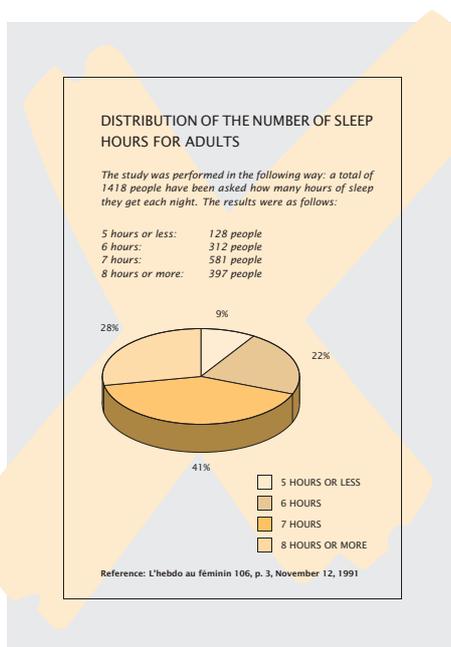


Creating the visuals

VISUALS ARE FOR CONVEYING MESSAGES—the same ones as the spoken text. For effective redundancy, both visuals and spoken text should be stand-alone: deaf audience members should thus be able to understand the messages by looking at the visuals only, and blind ones should be able to do so by listening to the spoken text only.

Visuals should moreover not compete with the spoken text for the audience's attention, lest they become noise: perhaps counterintuitively, a poor visual is worse than no visual at all. Necessarily, then, visuals should have as little text as possible, for the audience cannot read one text and listen to another at the same time. An effective visual gets the message across (conveying the *so what*, not merely the *what*) almost instantly.

Effective visuals are thus redundant, stand-alone, and visual. There lies the challenge: to express a message unambiguously with as little text as possible. Visual codings being in essence ambiguous, effective visuals almost always include some text: the message itself, stated as a short sentence (thus including a verb). Beyond this text statement, the message should be developed as visually as possible: this development should include only whatever words or phrases are necessary for the visual to stand alone, and preferably no complete sentences.



The above visual is poorly designed, for it

- conveys no message: the title expresses the *what*, not the *so what* about the data;
- contains much text and hence competes with the speaker for audience attention;
- exhibits a poor signal-to-noise ratio, with ineffectively redundant information.



Identify your various messages first, then create one visual for each one of them. State the message as a short sentence (in lieu of a title), conveying the *so what*, not merely the *what*. Illustrate the message as visually as possible, limiting text to whatever keywords help make the visual stand on its own.

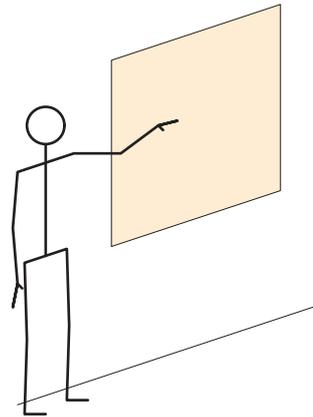
Do more with less: give meaning to all visual elements used, eliminate all visual noise. Use a consistent layout throughout the presentation. Use a single typeface at few different sizes. Use colors sparingly: develop a first design in black and white, then add color in light touches, for emphasis or identification.

Delivering the presentation

The face conveys emotions. The eyes look at the audience (at everyone, at all times).

The hands make deliberate, varied, highly visible gestures and no noise between gestures.

The body assumes a confident, stable stance. Shoulders, hips, and feet are facing the audience.



ORAL PRESENTATIONS are real-time performances. In contrast to written documents, they thus require that you handle three components simultaneously: what you say (verbal delivery), how you say it (vocal delivery), and everything that you let your audience see (visual delivery). While keeping all components under control, remain yourself. Show interest in your topic and in the people in front of you. Establish a genuine relationship: speak *to* them, not *at* them.

As a rule, speak extemporaneously: memorize your outline, but do not write out and memorize (or read) your wording. Instead, rehearse your presentation until you can express your ideas fluently. Eradicate filler words such as *um* or *er*: whenever you have to search for words, simply keep silent.

Adjust the mean value of your vocal tone, rate, and volume to the situation. Around this (constant) mean value, introduce meaningful signal by modulating your tone, rate, and volume according to the meaning, the complexity, and the importance of what you say (verbally), as a form of effective redundancy.

In visual delivery, strive for presence, stability, and sincerity. Presence commands attention. It stems from a position close to and perhaps higher than the audience, a confident stance, and eye contact with everyone, at all times, right in the eyes. Stability endows the messages with strength and credibility. It stems from a stable stance and sharp, deliberate gestures. Sincerity goes a long way towards convincing others. It stems from the match between verbal and nonverbal components, as expressed in part by facial expressions, revealing emotions.

Answering questions

QUESTIONS are typically the part of the presentation that many speakers hate or fear most. Nonetheless, they are an opportunity much more than a threat.

When taking any question, proceed in four steps:

- listen to the question, making eye contact with the person;
- if not everyone heard/understood it, repeat/rephrase it;
- pause to think before you answer: structure your answer;
- answer—briefly and to the point—for the whole audience.

As a rule, be honest and helpful. Dare to say things the way they are (for example that the question is off topic or that you do not know the answer), but strive to help, not offend, the person (for example, propose to provide an answer later).

When you are under attack, remain calm and professional:

- quiet the atmosphere: mark a pause before you answer;
- acknowledge the questioner's concern (emotional level);
- disagree with the questioner's opinion (intellectual level).

Listen	Strive to understand the question exactly.
Repeat (rephrase)	Make sure everyone gets the question.
Think	Construct your answer before delivering it.
Answer	Deliver your answer to the whole audience.