

The Write Touch Inc.
Presentation Skills 101

Almost everyone will, at some point in his or her life, have to give a speech or presentation. Whether in school, business or social setting it's important to understand and use good fundamental speaking skills. It can mean the difference between just delivering words and making a real impact. This article is meant for the beginner, but it's a good refresher for the seasoned presenter as well. These are basic rules and tips you can use for every presentation. Once you have the basics in hand, take it to the next level. You can use our (The Write Touch Inc.) tool: "*8 Steps to Creating a Powerful Presentation*" (see note at end) - or check the library, schools or training companies to learn more about presentation skills.

Much of the trepidation - the number one fear, researchers tell us - in giving a presentation comes simply from the fact that the presenter is more focused on self than content. This is actually an anomaly, a peculiar condition not at all following logic and common sense. Well, maybe some logic since most of us have an ego that tends to focus on self-image. However, as you'll see in the following rules and discussion, self-concern is generally unwarranted and often misguided.

Rule #1: There's no reason to be overly nervous because you know your subject. After all, isn't that the reason you're giving a presentation? You're an expert or at least very knowledgeable on the topic, right? Some "butterflies" are normal and actually a good thing - more on that below.

Rule #2: The audience wants you to succeed. They're on your side. No one attends a presentation hoping they'll be bored silly. As a matter of fact, I've witnessed bad speeches, and the reaction of the audience is invariably one of embarrassment - for the speaker. They *want* to learn something or be helped in some way. Give them a chance to like you and you'll be a big hit.

Rule #3: Be organized and prepared. You know the subject well, but don't just wing it. Put together an introduction, body, and conclusion. Make sure you have enough material for the time allotted, but not too much that you'll be cut off or make everyone uncomfortable by over extending your time.

Following are some tips and suggestions you should learn and practice. Some are quite easy, some take a bit more effort. Review them before each presentation until they become second nature.

Getting ready. Be well groomed and dress appropriately - always match the attire of your audience or be slightly over-dressed. Arrive early enough to check the facility, equipment and layout. Make sure everything works. Take your place and visualize whom you'll be addressing and where they'll be in relation to you. Just before the presentation, get yourself mentally and physically prepared. Some nervousness is not only expected, but can be a great asset. Getting the adrenaline and "juices" flowing helps keep you alert and enthused, both great attributes to a powerful presentation. Drink some water - not coffee or alcohol. Take some deep breaths to get the butterflies "flying in formation". Listen and observe what's going on around you. Above all, focus on the setting and audience, *not on yourself*.

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The Introduction. If you're to be introduced and the audience doesn't know you (other than by name or reputation), bring a short written bio so the host has something to use for your introduction. Acknowledge and thank your host, but don't dwell on *"I'm happy to be here"* dialogue. Use the introducing person's name and thank him or her as well as your audience. Keep the thank you separate from your speech introduction. It might go something like this: *"Thank you, Pat for that kind introduction and thank you (looking to the audience) for inviting me (or giving me the opportunity to address you today)"*. Now pause (see next point); make good eye contact (more on that in a moment); and give - *don't read* - your introduction.

The *"8 Steps to Creating a Powerful Presentation"* (see footnote at end) will help you prepare your introduction. Remember, the first few words must gain attention and goodwill. The audience is going to judge very quickly if they want to listen to you or not. The old adage *"people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care"* is just as applicable to speech giving as it is to building relationships. Let them know you care in the introduction - a human-interest story, a question or an anecdote - something to connect human to human. If you use a story or anecdote, it can be about you, but it should also be about *their* interests. That is, it should connect with the reason you're giving the presentation. **You're there to give them something of value, not the other way around.**

Trust the silence. Fillers and sentence crutches - the um's, ah's, you knows or 'ands' - are distracting and, if persistent, will cause your audience to "leave you". That is, they'll simply stop listening. Silence between thoughts and sentences is perfectly normal and always accepted. Even longer pauses to adjust notes, regroup or as a break between ideas are readily embraced by audiences. This is one of the more difficult areas for inexperienced speakers. In fact, it's likely you're not even aware that you use fillers. You must listen for them and get your sub-conscious mind to intercept them. This comes with practice and awareness. Have someone you know attend a presentation and give you honest feedback. Ask them to listen for the fillers or for other distracting mannerisms or habits. You can only get rid of these distractions if you first become aware they exist. Your conscious mind will then "instruct" your sub-conscious mind to eliminate unwanted habits.

Control the pace. This goes hand-in-hand with trusting the silence. Be careful not to talk too slowly or too quickly. Varying the pace of your presentation will make it more interesting and keep the audience engaged. The pace should match the content: faster for excitement, happy and fun; slower for drama, sad or reflection. Keep in mind that you *and* your audience need a break periodically. It's only a few seconds but a pause when making a point or shifting gears (changing ideas) can be a powerful tool.

Eye contact. Talk *to* your audience, not *at* them. If you've been taught to look over the heads of those you're speaking to, forget it. Good eye contact means exactly that - making a connection with your audience by looking them straight in the eyes. If the audience is small enough, try to make eye contact with everyone. For larger audiences, divide it into sections - front-back, center-left-right - and make eye contact with someone in each of those sections. Make any contact long enough to *"be connected"*, but not too long as to be uncomfortable or convey selectivity. In a sales presentation, be especially careful to include everyone. Focusing on the highest ranking people to the exclusion of

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subordinates has killed many a sale.

Posture and movement. If possible, use movement to connect with your audience (in conjunction with eye contact). Use movement for purpose and make it fit the facility. *Don't pace!* Move forward to make a point, back to emphasize some rejection (of an opposing opinion, e.g.) or some negative connotation. Move toward a section in a larger group to establish better connection. If you are stuck at a lectern, because of the microphone or other facility limitations, step back from the lectern. This will allow you to use natural movement and hand gestures while also preventing you from leaning on or clutching the lectern. Sound on the lectern (tapping, shuffling papers) can easily be transmitted through the microphone and will destroy a great speech every time. Even if you're using notes (see next topic), you can move about if you don't need a microphone or have a portable mic. Finally, let your hands do what they want. Everyone "talks" with his or her hands to one extent or another. Don't clasp or put your hands behind your back (that's a non-verbal that you're hiding something). Don't stand at attention. No one talks with their arms straight down to their sides - try it, it's really unnatural and uncomfortable. Again, let the hands and arms do what they naturally would do.

Use note cards. Notepads and sheets of paper are bulky, noisy, and most of all, distracting. If you need notes, use 3 X 5 note cards. Audiences don't care if you use notes. Even the best speakers rely on notes to ensure they communicate the points efficiently and effectively. What audiences don't like, however, is someone who reads a speech to them. Using PowerPoint slides and reading the points on the slides is especially bad form (more on that later).

Conclusion. Again, using the *"8 Steps to Creating a Powerful Presentation."* (see footnote) will help you with the conclusion. Please don't just end with some form of "that's all I have". You want to summarize and refer back to your opening with another anecdote or quote or some powerful statement and a simple "thank you". Wait for any applause (hopefully, enthusiastic) and then stay put for either Q&A or for the host or hostess to come to you.

Taking questions. If you have Q&A time at the end or the format allows for questions during the presentation, listen carefully to each question and take a few seconds to think about your response. *First, repeat the question so everyone can hear it.* That also buys you a few seconds to formulate a response. It's also good technique to ask the questioner to clarify anything that may seem general or ambiguous. Stay positive, even when the question may be negative or challenging. Don't argue or get into a discussion with someone. If necessary, you can say, *"Let me address that further after we're done here and let's see if some others have a question."* It's okay to say you don't know the answer and tell the person you'll get back to them (make sure you do). Don't make something up. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. A good approach with certain questions is to say *"I don't know" or "I'm not sure", followed by "but I'll tell you what I do know. . ."* or *"but I think that. . ."* When you're finished with Q&A, get the last word in. You may even have a second conclusion prepared or give a plug for your book, website or how your audience can contact you for follow up.

Equipment. If you're using visual display, make sure it's supporting the presentation and not a distraction. If you're displaying on a screen (such as a PowerPoint presentation),

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place the computer (or overhead or notes) between you and the audience so you can reference the material without turning your back on the audience. **Above all - please don't read the material.** Nothing is more boring than putting up bullet points and reading each one. If that's your idea of a presentation, mail it in. I'm not going to try to cover all the technical nuances you may encounter. Technology is constantly changing - generally for the better - and facilities vary widely. Know what you're dealing with and check it out ahead of time.

Rule #4: Always look *up* to your audience not down. I'm talking about *tone*, not physical setting. One of the most annoying fillers is "okay?". Another form is "do you follow?" or "understand what I mean?". If you make a statement and then conclude it with "okay?" or one of these other "confirmations", you're essentially treating your audience as inferior, unsophisticated or just plain stupid. It's demeaning and even if they don't outwardly acknowledge that you've insulted them, sub-consciously they'll believe you think you're better than them. Not good in any situation. Now, it's perfectly all right to get confirmation when the situation calls for it, but it can be done diplomatically. If, for example, you've delivered some complicated material or addressed a question, how about simply saying "does everyone agree with that?" or maybe "are there any questions about that?" It never hurts to give your audience some kudos whenever you can - without being patronizing. A sincere "that's a great question", "you've been a great audience" or "I've really enjoyed visiting with you" are all appropriate and appreciated.

Rule #5: Practice, practice, practice. You can overcome anxiety associated with speaking through experience. Volunteering to be the one who gives a presentation will also get you noticed, and you'll stand out as a leader. If you want to get lots of practice and become a highly proficient presenter, join your local Toastmasters club. There's a link to find a local club at [Toastmasters International website](#). It's a very supportive and comfortable environment, and these basics tips and rules will quickly become second nature.

Final Thought. Almost all great leaders, and what we generally consider successful people, possess excellent presentation skills. Contrary to what you may think, they weren't born with that talent. Yes, some people have more innate attributes such as an outgoing personality, natural humor or a better speaking voice. But **public speaking is primarily a learned skill, through training and practice.** Most everyone who works at getting better will eventually love making presentations and speeches. Those who don't reach a feeling of euphoria that comes with the applause or accolades of a well-delivered presentation will learn to leave the task to someone else. Good Luck.

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NOTE: if you're reading this from a link from my website and would like the "8 Steps to Creating a Powerful Presentation." you have 2 choices. You can purchase it for \$10 ([send me an email](#) and I'll give you instructions) or get it free by signing up for my e-newsletter *Communication Tips and Tools*. If you're already a subscriber, it's free. Email me and I'll send it to you.