Oral Communication Resources

Presentational Speaking

Organization

Organizing your Presentation

After completing your research, and after determining your goals with your specific audience, your next step is to organize your material. When organizing, you are always thinking about how to make it easier for your listeners to follow your train of thought. You want to help them see the relationships between the ideas and materials you are presenting so that they will see why your conclusions are legitimate. It is not enough to just "lay out the facts." You need to help your listeners understand how those facts fit together, and why they lead to the conclusions you are asserting.

You cannot organize in a vacuum. You need to know and thoroughly understand your material, and you need to have a good sense of what, in a nutshell, you want your audience to think about your material. This means that you must have thoroughly analyzed the issue about which you are speaking. This section on organization and support assumes you have thoroughly researched your topic.

A cautionary note about presentation software: do not organize your presentation by putting your material into the templates provided by software programs used to generate presentation "slides". You need to determine the organizational needs of your material in relationship to your purpose and your audience. Only then will you be able to determine how your material needs to be presented. If you use this software, make it your tool, don't let it dictate what you will say or how you will say it. You want your material to be remembered. It won't be remembered if it looks like and is presented in the same way as every other presentation.

Questions and Guidelines to Help Organize Your Presentation

- What is your thesis, or what will you claim in your argument? In one sentence, state what you are saying in this presentation. This should be your thesis.

- What topics and subtopics need to be covered in order to explain/support your thesis with these listeners while meeting your purpose(s)?

- Brainstorm: write them all down

- Label your topics and subtopics as follows:

  ✓ Absolutely essential

- ✓ Useful, interesting, would <u>like</u> to cover, but could eliminate if necessary.
- ✓ Interesting, but not really relevant, given my purpose, the thesis, and this audience.

- Eliminate all topics and subtopics you have labeled interesting but not necessary. Include only those topics labeled that will fit in the time you are allowed.

- What is the natural organization for these ideas?

  - ✓ Does it make sense to analyze the problem before focusing on the solution?
  - ✓ Will a chronology help establish the power of a trend?
  - ✓ Will highlighting separate topics emphasize the breadth of your topic?
  - ✓ Do you need to establish a causal relationship?

- Decide how these ideas relate to each other and your thesis, so that the relevance of your material will become evident.

- What three or four main headings summarize your material?

- What subtopics fit with which headings?

- Generate a basic outline of what you want to say.

Mapping the Relationships Among Ideas

Many people hate outlines. At the same time, many people have welcomed with great enthusiasm the templates provided by presentation software--which are (gasp!) outlines.

There are any number of forms that can be helpful to you in mapping out your ideas. The main point to remember: the map you create should be your tool, not the other way around. Don't let someone else's map dictate to you how you are going to say what you say. I repeat: do not let someone else's map (for example, presentational software) dictate what you will say and/or how you will say it.

The old advice is: tell them what you are going to tell them (introduction), tell them (body), and then tell them what you told them (conclusion). This is the basic structure of a Western presentation. Other cultural traditions vary from this structure, so be willing to learn and adapt your structure to the cultural context within which you are functioning.

It is useful to consider the functions that need to be served in the different parts of a speech. The functions will vary with culture. In the examples here I've identified standard functions expected in Western tradition.

[Click here for an example of Standard Outline Format](#)

Alternative Approaches

If you prefer, think in terms of clusters. What 3 or 4 clusters of ideas cover your material? What are the relationships of these clusters to each other? Draw a map of these relationships.

Some individuals struggle with forcing material into a format that seems too linear, far too explicit, and that seems to leave little room for nuances, ambiguity, and context. The approach detailed here is very Western, and needs to be recognized as culturally bound. I believe it is important for individuals to be able to present material in this style, but it is equally important to recognize that the explicit linear style is not always appropriate, nor desirable. For example, in contexts where saving face is critical, ambiguity may be far more important than explicitly taking a position and arguing for it.

Nevertheless, the linearity of time (i.e., you are speaking within a linear time frame) forces you to decide what you will speak about first, then second, then third, (i.e., organization). If that linearity is problematic, you will need to provide some other kind of framework to help your audience see how the elements of your presentation fit together. You must orient your audience to your organization verbally, and you will need to remind them throughout your presentation how each of the pieces you discuss fit into the larger argument. We often think of transitions as just devices that "dress up" a speech. They are much more important than that. Careful transitions make the connections among ideas.

Respect your own tradition. Even as the academic or corporate setting often calls for explicit organization, remember that it is only one style. Learning this style does not invalidate you, nor should this style be seen as having more value than other cultural styles. It just happens to be the dominant formal style used in settings of power within the United States.

ORGANIZATION