

A Brief Guide to Spoken Presentations

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The procedure for the preparation of a spoken presentation can be articulated in five parts, that may be called “the five P’s”, from the initial letter of the terms that define each step: Prologue, Premise, Production, Promotion and Pronouncement.

Prologue

The first procedure has been termed Prologue and constitutes the preparatory stage, leading to those that follow. Given that the topic of the presentation is here considered as already determined, this step has the purpose of taking into account and consideration various features that regard the presentation itself. It may be sustained that initially the time, place and action of the talk must be pondered upon. The action may be retained to refer to the talk or speech itself. The speaker needs not only to pose him/herself the obvious questions of what to say and how to say it, but also those related to the motivation and purpose determining the talk. It is necessary to consider such aspects as the necessity of the discourse and its relevance and pertinence, first in a general sense, and then specifically in relation to the particular audience. This latter point leads to the concept of place, that may be retained to involve the public in front of whom the speaking will take place and to whom it is directed. The speaker must try to evaluate the degree of interest that the talk can stimulate in the listeners, and this means estimating and reflecting on the characteristics, competences, knowledge and understanding of the audience. Only by undertaking this appraisal can the suitable and appropriate register and style of the talk be determined. The third important aspect concerns the time, namely, the duration of the presentation, that should be the object of careful reflection in this preliminary assessment. If, as is usual, there are time limits to the length of the speech, these must be respected. Moreover, it is always better to err on the side of paucity than of excess in the presentation, and so occupy less rather than more of the time at one’s disposal. When questions are foreseen or the speaker wishes to allow space for them, these too must be taken into account in relation to the time available.

Premise

The second procedure has been termed Premise and represents the introductory phase. It is usual for oral presentations to be

written down, to be read or memorised at a subsequent stage. However, before putting pen to paper, the speaker should carefully meditate on what s/he wants to say, clarifying in his/her mind the different notions and concepts, evaluating not only their relative importance, but also their specific pertinence and relevance to the topic. In this pre-writing phase, the most important points regarding the contents should be mentally prepared and selected, and their collocation within the discourse should be determined. This is the stage in which the general arrangement or plan of the speech is decided upon, so that before the actual writing of the presentation its basic organisation and layout are clear in the mind, together with the essential phases of succession and progression of the ideas and information.

Production

The third stage is that of the Production of the talk. As has been anticipated, this is generally done in writing. The contents of the presentation should be carefully collocated and distributed, with one point leading logically on from the other. The introduction should provide an anticipation of the contents, furnishing a preview of what will be said. The purpose here is to attract immediately the attention and interest of the public. In particular, the opening sentences are important in that they must establish the essential channels of contact and communication with the audience.

Following the introduction, the discourse should be composed respecting coherence and cohesion, employing effective sequencing and segmentation and introducing appropriate salience. Even if the text is written, it must be remembered that it is destined to be said, and it should therefore conform to the parameters of formal spoken discourse. Consequently its logical progression should not only be planned, but should be rendered evident to the listeners. It is therefore particularly important to signal clearly the passage from one topic or point to another, using the appropriate indicators, so that the audience can be aided in the understanding of the text and facilitated in its comprehension. With regard to the distribution of the information and data in the discourse, the most important elements should be provided first, after the introduction, when the attention of the public is particularly high. Following the introduction of the main theme, the talk can proceed with the articulation of this topic in

different parts or phases. Each of these must be effectively elaborated and adequately dealt with before another new or less important element is introduced.

Just as particular attention must be dedicated to the beginning of the talk, analogous consideration must be bestowed on its ending. The essential characteristic of the conclusion is that it should derive logically from all that has preceded it. Once this condition is fulfilled, the contents of the conclusion itself may either look backwards or forwards or both. Thus it can provide a summary, an underlining or an emphasising of the most important points of the talk, in this way reminding the listeners of what has preceded it, or it may refer to a potential continuance, to possible developments, or to the need for further study and research, thus projecting the listeners into the future. Obviously, it may also carry out both functions.

The final sentences, like the initial ones, must be carefully thought out and should leave an impression and a memory in the minds of the listeners. In order to achieve this, it is expedient to conclude with sentences that have a particular prominence and that carry a specific significance, and that are neither too long nor too complicated, given that it is essential that the public should be able follow without difficulty the conclusions reached. It is also important to finish with a word that carries semantic weight, and therefore it is inadvisable to end on adverbs, pronouns or prepositions. Instead, nouns and full verbs are to be preferred, possibly as terminations of a resonant expression or phrase.

Promotion

The fourth stage, called Promotion, may be considered to be simultaneous with that of Production, even if some of its aspects can be elaborated subsequent to it. The idea of promotion is, on the one hand, that of advancing and favouring, and on the other, that of assisting and supporting, the effectiveness and persuasiveness of the discourse, thus determining its credibility and success. The most used and useful technique for achieving these aims is the provision of examples, exemplifications and illustrations. These may be technical or specialised, or in any case inherent to the subject-matter of the presentation, but a dimension of human interest, when it is carefully calibrated and when there is not too much of it, can often be agreeable and welcome. Citations and quotations may further contribute to the effectiveness of the talk if they are sparingly used. When the discourse makes use of the work, opinions and positions of others, the speaker must clarify this fact, and indicate the correct paternity of the elements or features in question so as to avoid attribution to his/her own person.

In this stage the presentation can also be globally re-examined to verify that it is not flat and boring or tedious and repetitive. The talk should modulate easily and fluently from one topic to another, but this fluency should not become monotony and therefore it is crucial to introduce variations of lexis and syntax. Furthermore, as has been remembered, the presentation is written to be spoken. This raises the question of the frequent case in

which the discourse consists in the integral reading of the written text. In this situation, not only do the above-indicated criteria become even more essential, but the presenter must make an effort to establish a contact with the public by glancing or looking at it whenever possible, by inserting one or two direct addresses to the audience, and by paying particular attention to the auditory effectiveness of the speech.

An important and fundamental sector in the context of the promotion of oral presentations is the use of visual aids. These should be carefully decided upon and selected. The name itself is a reminder of the two essential purposes of this type of assistance for the speaker. The first important function concerns the visibility and perception of the information presented in this way; the second, its role in helping or assisting the beholder. With regard to the first point, therefore, it is essential that visual aids should remain predominantly visual. This obviously does not exclude writing, but it is necessary that the written text should be quickly assimilated, practically at a glance. With visual aids it is also advisable not to engage upon a mere reading out loud of what appears in them. The best way to think of visual aids is to conceive them as signposts indicating, explaining and commenting the direction and the way, but not as the way itself. This leads directly to the second function, that of aid, which signifies not only that they should help the public, but that they should be a support, and not a substitute, for the speaker. Consequently, visual aids ought not to become a surrogate for the presentation, but should sustain and facilitate the understanding of the discourse on the part of the audience. They must therefore be talked *about*, and the presenter must refer to them, and elucidate and describe them. It accordingly follows that visual aids are not to be treated as something apart from the speaker, handed over and abandoned in the hands or better, the eyes, of the public. The speaker must not present these aids and then ignore them, but must interact with them. In a word, they should not be used as information dumps, where the speaker deposits and unloads everything that s/he has neither the time nor the wish or desire to deal with.

Whatever the form used, visual aids must be lucid and direct, as also illustrative and explanatory. If a written text is employed it should evidence these same criteria and not be vague, imprecise, lengthy or complicated. It is useful to employ a new line for each sentence or phrase and to number the different concepts or to introduce bullet points. Furthermore, it is advisable to make use of clear and easily visible lettering, and, with the technological forms, a non-disturbing and non-distracting colour or pattern for the text and for the background ought to be selected.

There are different types of visual aids, but they may be divided into two main categories: those that are projected onto a screen and those that are presented without projection. With regard to the first category, in the past transparencies and slides were the common form, whereas at present PowerPoint is becoming the more current kind of projection. Non-projecting types of aids consist in the traditional blackboards, whiteboards and flip charts. There are advantages and disadvantages in the use of both typologies. The technological forms are more appreciated by the public; they are flexible and versatile and immediately accessible. However, they may often absorb too much attention away from the contents of the presentation and in the case of technical problems they can become completely unserviceable. The 'traditional' forms take longer to

present, given that they usually have to be written at the same time as they are being spoken, and they also generally require greater concentration on the part of the audience. However, they can be prepared and transcribed in advance and, in any case, an interruption while the speaker is briefly writing something down on a board can provide an acceptable and even useful variation in the pace and rhythm of the presentation.

As has been said, visual aids can contain a prose text, but they are useful for furnishing data, and so are particularly valuable when it is necessary to integrate and document the talk with tables, graphs, bar or pie charts and diagrams.

Pronouncement

By Pronouncement is here signified not only the utterance of the discourse with its phonetic articulation but also its mode of physical presentation. It seems obvious to say that the pronunciation of the words must be correct, but often, particularly with English proper names, foreign speakers are unaware that they have a mistaken articulation. Thus they mispronounce them, thinking instead that they are saying them correctly. It is therefore advisable to check proper names and particularly surnames in a dictionary that furnishes the pronunciation of such words.

Before the actual presentation, the speaker should practice more than once the recital of the entire discourse. The most obvious reason for this is to control the timing, to make sure that the talk fits into the allotted time, if there is such a limit. Moreover, a careful and repeated reading is necessary so that the speaker can familiarise not only with the sound of the text but also with the sound of his/her own voice saying it (especially if this is the first public speaking experience). Furthermore, the rehearsing of the discourse consents the selection and organisation, as also the practice and subsequently efficient employment, of various elements. Reading aloud permits the choice of the speed and tone, and allows the determination and systematization of their modulation and variation, so as to avoid flatness and monotony in the enunciation with consequent tedium and boredom in the listener. The practising of the speaking of the text also makes possible the adoption of certain features, such as the apposite intonation patterns and the appropriate phrasing, functional in their reflection and transmission of the units of sense and meaning, thus aiding in the comprehension of what is spoken. These trials moreover permit the selection of words, phrases and sections to which a particular highlighting needs to be given, achievable through the use of emphasis and stress. Such readings further allow the gauging of the length and distribution of the pauses, and thus of the silences, an underestimated feature, that is instead essential and functional to the effectiveness of a long stretch of speech. All these elements contribute notably to rendering the discourse more interesting and efficacious.

In this process of repetition it is particularly important to rehearse the introduction and the conclusion, since these are the most important parts of the talk and those that will presumably attract the greatest attention on the part of the public.

Instead, with regard to the actual physical presentation, the speaker must make every effort to convey an impression of ease and tranquillity. Therefore both an unsure and an over-sure attitude must be avoided. If the speaker presents him/herself as timid

and diffident, and speaks in a tentative, vague and undecided way, the public will be disconcerted and guarded. On the other hand, if the speaker emerges as aggressive and pushy, and assumes a haughty and conceited manner, then the public will assume an attitude of defence and antagonism. The speaker must thus be firm and self-confident, authoritative but not authoritarian.

During the actual presentation, the speaker should look at the public and estimate and evaluate the effect of the talk on the participants. This control is necessary because it is usually possible to understand, by looking at the expressions on the faces of the audience, if the presentation is creating difficulties of comprehension. In this case it is possible to slow down the speed of the talk, or to repeat or rephrase any problematic points, or to dedicate more time to explanations. Given that this in turn generates problems of timing, it is better to think ahead and decide to omit subsequent unessential elements rather than sacrifice the global effectiveness of the presentation.

It has been said that particular consideration must be dedicated to the initial and final sentences in the preparation of the talk. Specifically, the importance of the conclusion has been emphasised since it tends to remain in the memory. It is therefore only logical that in the phase of enunciation an analogous attention should correspond to the care already taken in the phase of production. The speaker needs to organize the approach to the conclusion by the insertion of appropriate linguistic indicators, to signal that the discourse is drawing to its close, in this way smoothing the way for the final assertions and preparing the public for the ending. One of the most common defects in presentations is to hurry into the conclusion and accelerate the speed of enunciation. This is generally motivated by the awareness that time is running out or has already run out. One solution is that of carefully rehearsing the timing so that there are always some minutes to spare; another is that of being prepared to omit something in order to finish. It is always better to say less well than to say more badly. The conclusion of a talk is neither the place for unexpected turns and sudden surprises, nor the moment for inept velocity and hasty mumblings. A presentation should be conceived as a leisurely walk at an easy pace, and not as a race with a final rush, and this is the impression that it should also leave in the listener.

Indeed, the metaphor of the leisurely walk is particularly useful and may serve as concluding and summarising recommendation. The speaker should accompany the listener along a selected road, furnishing information and explanations regarding its aspects and characteristics, guiding, aiding and visualising the progression, employing the necessary signposts of direction, keeping the ultimate destination in sight, and finally reaching it together with the listeners, who should emerge from the experience not breathless and bewildered, but cool, calm, collected and convinced.

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