

Writing for the ear

People who write for verbal presentations often run into trouble because they read aloud text that is better suited to silent. This handout will hopefully give you some ideas that will make your presentation better.

Remember that when you give an oral presentation that you are probably giving an overview of more detailed work. You should rarely expect listeners to absorb complicated arguments or remember a great deal of data. (The possible exception occurs when you are an expert in a field presenting an in-depth analysis of a discrete problem to other experts.) If your listeners want a more complete version of your work, they will either ask detailed questions or ask for a copy of your research.

Accordingly, you should greatly simplify anything you present. Do not simply read from a paper you wrote for a class or for publication, but rather trim it down to a new version. All the following suggestions start with the assumption that you are heavily editing a paper specifically for presentation.

Structure

Here are some general structural hints to help you arrange your material.

- Stay within your time. Worry more about going over your time than under, and most people try to present far too much material. Use this rule of thumb: 250 words take about two minutes to read aloud, which means that every double-spaced page is about two minutes when read aloud (and a single-spaced page is *four* minutes' worth of reading). If you prepare an outline of topics rather than a document to read aloud, you will take even longer to get through your material, perhaps two minutes per 100 words of notes. Always practice and time yourself, especially if you are working from notes and not reading a prepared statement.
- Pick one or two points to emphasize. You can't get everything in, and you want people to come away with a point (e.g., "we need to increase funding to regional arts councils") or two (e.g., "we should increase funding to regional arts councils, even if we must divert funding from federal arts funding").
- Similarly, limit the number of examples you use per point and keep data simple. Always have the more complete version on hand for reference, including its source, but just give the upshot and name your source of data.
- State your major points near the beginning of your talk, and telegraph your changes of points. It's fine to number these, but make sure it's plain you're changing subjects: pause for a drink of water, say something like "now, turning to ..." and name your new subject, change slides if you're using them, or otherwise indicate a

change of subject.

- Use humor sparingly. You may want to entertain your listeners, but not everything is funny. You may also seem condescending if you pull humor into a serious talk.
- Limit the use of slides and handouts. Generally, put data your audience needs either on a slide or an overhead, not both, as you do not want people listening to you, reading a handout, and looking at an overhead at the same time. If you can use the slides only for major points, such as simple data or a pointer to where you are in the talk, all the better.

Wording

These guidelines are to help you more at the sentence level as you are preparing your material.

- Use short, familiar words instead of technical terms when you can, especially initially. While it may be more accurate to say “replication of DNA,” “makes a copy of the genetic code” or “exactly copies the DNA” means more or less the same thing and can be easier to listen to. Similarly, acronyms can help you when you refer to lengthy technical terms (e.g., “DNA” for “deoxyribonucleic acid”) or names (e.g., “TTC” for “Toronto Transit Commission”).
- Keep most sentences short. Listeners easily get sidetracked in complicated sentences, and your listeners cannot go back and review if they get lost. You need not keep them all short, as that can lead to a staccato effect, but try to keep most sentences shorter rather than longer.
- Avoid complicated verb tenses. Use the simple, active present when possible. For instance, it’s easier to follow “CD players shine a light on a disk, which a sensor then reads” rather than “When the CD player is reading the disk it is shining a light on it which a sensor is then reading.” Also, use the simple past (“He went to the store”) rather than perfect tenses (“He has gone to the store” or “He had gone to the store”). The same goes for the future tense—use the simple future. How can you tell whether you’re using the simpler verb tenses? If you find yourself using a lot of helping verbs (is, are, has, have, be, been, was, will) with a lot of *-ing* form verbs, you’re using complex tenses. Try restating your sentence so as to remove the helping verb.
- Try to use verbs rather than nouns. Instead of “the development of the project,” try “as the project develops.” If you’ve got a verb followed by *-ing*, *-ment*, or *-tion*, you can often get rid of it and just use the verb.
- Define complicated or frequently misunderstood terms. If you want to talk about global climate change, for instance, you may need to define “carbon cycle.”
- Consider your audience. An American audience probably doesn’t know what CSIS

is, but will know what the FBI is, so you should spell out what “CSIS” stands for and skip defining “FBI.” A group of health-care workers will know HIV is not readily transmitted through casual social contact, but if you talk about AIDS with the general public, perhaps you should mention that fact.

- Repeat and restate complicated terms occasionally. Just because you define a term once doesn’t mean your audience will absorb all of it at one go. If there’s a key concept your listeners need to retain, restate or paraphrase it now and again. For instance, if you were working on a project concerning AIDS awareness, you might find yourself referring to retroviral DNA. In that case, you should probably briefly redefine that term if you have not used it in a few sentences, like so: “Retroviruses, viruses of the same sort as those that cause AIDS, are hard to fight.” For acronyms, occasionally use the full name: “The TTC, the Toronto Transit Commission, has a long history ... ”
- Beware of using too many pronouns. If you write a document that has confusing pronoun references, people take a moment to puzzle out what you mean. When you speak, however, people cannot stop and go back to see what you’re referring to. A sentence like this can confuse listeners: “People with mentally ill relatives may refuse to deal with the issues directly and may avoid talking frankly about them, even as they grow more and more isolated.” Who here is “they”: the mentally ill family members or their healthier relatives? Could it be both? In this case, it probably doesn’t matter, but you don’t want your audience members trying to work out such a problem while you talk.
- Use interesting images, comparisons, metaphors, and analogies if you can do so without stretching the point. If you can frame a new concept in terms of something your audience already understands and accepts, it makes it easier for them to follow your point. Again, with something like a campaign to disseminate AIDS information, you might draw the parallel to other diseases that had been fought using public information spots, such as polio, tuberculosis, smallpox, and even the flu.

Finally, always read your script aloud a few times—not to practice so much as to listen to how it flows and to time it. Where you stumble in reading it aloud the first time or two, you probably would mentally “stumble” while listening to it: long sentences, difficult terms, complicated phrases, and the like.