

The Writing Student's Guide to Successful Oral Presentations

Patricia E. Connors

Graduates of technical writing programs often enter the workplace with poor oral communication skills due to lack of practice. The trainer or writing teacher can use several strategies to offer the students oral practice without expending a great deal of class time. Recommended classroom strategies include teaching the students basic preparation skills and presentational techniques, giving them brief as well as longer practice following strict time limits, and allowing them to receive immediate feedback from listeners. These efforts can aid writing students in giving oral presentations and in preparing them for the work setting.

THE NEED FOR PRACTICE

Many college students taking a technical writing course at the junior, senior, or graduate level are uncomfortable with oral presentations. They may be required to take a course in speech or oral communication, but often this course is oriented toward Aristotelian techniques of persuasion in speaking formally to a large group.

The typical college speech class, while very useful to future technical writers, may not prepare students for small group presentations, visually-aided presentations, or for leading meetings and problem-solving discussions of project groups. These types of oral presentation are common on the job.

Many technical writing students lack experience in oral presentations as well as the motivation to polish their oral skills. The reasons for their weakness in this area lie in the typical academic setting. Students naturally prefer to continue in the passive role they are used to in many classrooms, leaving the responsibility for speaking with the teacher or some other peer.

If students evade the challenge to be independent, they will not mature academically or professionally, and they will not be ready for the responsibilities of professional employment.

What prevents students from making effective oral presentations? Some of the causes include fear of

making a mistake, fear of looking foolish, fear of the unknown speaking situation, and--most of all--fear of criticism. These natural fears can prevent students from working to prepare effective oral presentations.

However, with some effort, the instructor and the other students can take a positive approach to evaluating efforts at oral presentation just as they do at evaluating written presentations. They can identify and praise the effective elements of a presentation and make suggestions for the improvement of the weaker or less effective parts.

Despite the importance of oral presentational skills on the job, they are rarely stressed in writing classes. Technical writing teachers are often unable to devote more than a small portion of the semester to oral presentations because of their commitment to emphasize writing. Even though some public speaking is required in most technical writing courses today, time is limited due to the need to work on written communication.

However, a number of strategies and assignments can be incorporated into the technical writing class which do not take much class time and which will help prepare unprepared students for on-the-job oral presentations.

The following section includes some recommended assignments to prepare students for oral presentations.

DEVELOP ONE MINUTE ASSIGNMENTS

Require students to prepare a brief (one-half page) written summary of each writing assignment they do in the course and to stand up and speak that summary to the class the day they submit the assignment--in about 1 minute or less. They must write the summary so that they are prepared to speak. They must stand in front of the group, look directly at the class, and talk to them in a professional manner.

A grade for this presentation can be a component of the grade for the written assignment. These presentations can also be graded pass/fail to lower pressure.

For one of these oral summaries, require students to take one illustration (graph figure, or table) from a written report they have done in the course and make a transparency of the illustration. Require the students to explain their written assignment using the transparency to illustrate and explain the report.

DEVELOP FIVE MINUTE ORAL REPORTS

For a five minute oral presentation, ask the students to develop two or three discussion questions based on an assigned reading. Then ask them to lead a five minute class discussion.

For a second three to five minute oral assignment, ask the students to lead a class discussion on a topic they know and have recently written about for a class assignment. For example, if the student recently wrote an explanation of how a sphygmomanometer (blood pressure machine) works, the same student could find out how much the class knows about blood pressure and how it is measured, and then could explain and demonstrate briefly how the machine takes the measurement.

This activity can be varied to become part of prewriting or idea generation activities to find a topic to write on. For example, instead of asking the students to write down a list of machines or mechanisms they could explain to someone else, ask them to choose one item from their list and briefly explain the basics to the class. This oral activity--if kept to strict time limits--is not only a preparation for the formal writing but also offers the students practice for leadership responsibilities on the job.

ASSIGN COLLABORATIVE ORAL PROJECTS

Another type of oral activity is to use small groups of students--which may have been organized for collaborative writing or editing projects--to develop oral skills and to overcome some of the typical fears.

One exercise is to ask students to read a short written assignment to the writing group and ask each group member to summarize what the student said in a sentence or two. This activity is a test of the writing assignment, the listening skills of the group, and the oral summary skills of the listeners.

Another suggestion is to use the writing groups as practice sessions for longer oral presentations to the whole class. Develop a review sheet which the members can fill out, or make a list of questions for

the group to answer, such as:

- Could you hear the speaker?
- Was the presentation too fast or slow?
- What could be added or changed to make the presentation more interesting?

Students can time one another and give suggestions for the use of visual aids to illustrate the presentation.

INVOLVE LISTENERS ACTIVELY

For full-length oral presentations to the whole class--even of five or ten minutes--one strategy is to schedule the students you expect to be good speakers first so that the others have a model to follow.

Another approach is to ask reluctant students to choose when they want to speak. Some may want to go first to "get it over with" while some may want to go last to see what the others do.

Require the students to use some kind of visual aid for their large-group presentations, such as transparencies, slides, posters, the blackboard, a computer demonstration, or a flip chart. The students should practice the use of these aids in a small group first.

Visual aids can make an oral presentation more effective, but they affect the timing of the presentation and must be well-planned. The instructor may need to assist students in checking the machines they are using before the presentations.

OBSERVE TIME LIMITS

The issue of timing in these activities is very important, both for the instructor who must use the limited class time fairly to the advantage of all the students and to the students who must learn to speak within time limits.

Ask a student in the class to use a stop watch to time each oral presentation and to give the speaker warning signals when time is running out. Ask other listeners to summarize, explain, or ask a question about what they have heard to give the speaker feedback and to show whether the speaker has been understood.

If these individual and group activities are carefully planned, and if the students understand the purpose of oral presentations, the instructor can challenge the students out of their complacency to become mature, active learners and speakers.

All students can improve their skills in oral presentation. They may not be ready for Prime Time after they finish your course, but with some practice in oral presentation, they are less likely to frustrate, bore, or bewilder their future employers and employees.

Speaking aloud aids in the editing process for writers, because we tend to speak our ideas in conversation more naturally than in writing. Flawed ideas, incoherence, and other problems become apparent in an oral presentation. Effective oral skills serve every writer and employee in good stead.

The following briefly annotated references offer additional assignments and strategies to teachers and students of oral communication

REFERENCES

Anderson, Paul V., Technical Writing: A Reader-Centered Approach, 2nd edition, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, San Diego, CA, 1991.

This text includes a short chapter on "Delivering Oral Presentations" which focuses on advice about what to do during the delivery of the presentation with brief explanations of the chapter's eight guidelines, such as "Exhibit enthusiasm and interest."

Brusaw, Charles T., Gerald J. Alred, and Walter E. Oliu, Handbook of Technical Writing, 3rd edition, St. Martin's, New York, NY, 1987.

This handbook's eleven-page entry on oral presentations discusses the topics of purpose, audience analysis, organization, delivery, equipment, visual aids, and relationship to the audience.

Day, Robert A., How to Write & Publish a Scientific Paper, 3rd edition, Oryx, Phoenix, AZ, 1988.

In a four-page chapter titled "How to Present a Paper Orally," this highly focused text gives the writer of a scientific paper advice about how to present it.

Hackos, JoAnn T. Speaking with Style: A Guide to Presenting at the ITCC, STC, Arlington, VA, n.d. This fourteen-page guide, prepared for STC

members presenting at the annual conference, contains excellent suggestions adaptable to the classroom, particularly on preparation, practice, and the use of visual aids.

Houp, Kenneth W., and Thomas E. Pearsall, Reporting Technical Information, 7th edition, MacMillan, New York, NY, 1992.

The chapter on "Oral Reports" in the seventh edition is an excellent source of advice on oral presentations. The chapter includes information on preparation, arranging content, presentation, audience interaction, visual aids, and visual presentation. The chapter is one of the most thorough, complete, and up-to-date sources on the topic. The planning and revision checklists are especially useful as summaries of key points to prepare in planning a presentation.

Keene, Michael L., Effective Professional and Technical Writing, 2nd edition, D. C. Heath, Lexington, MA, 1993.

This text includes an excellent thirty-nine page chapter (with illustrations) on "Visuals" as well as a nineteen-page chapter titled "Oral Reports and Poster Presentations." The chapter on oral reports contains advice about preparation, organization, and presentation it also contains rarely-presented advice about how to design and deliver poster presentations.

Kolin, Philip C., Successful Writing at Work, 3rd edition, D. C. Heath, Lexington, MA, 1990.

In its sixteen-page chapter on "Oral Reports:" the author gives advice about "Informal Briefings," "Formal Speeches," audience analysis, delivery, and preparation of an oral presentation. The chapter also contains brief but useful advice about how to use visuals.

Markel, Michael H., Technical Writing: Situations and Strategies, 2nd edition, St. Martin's, New York, NY, 1988.

"Oral Presentations," a sixteen- page chapter, discusses types of presentations, preparation, delivery, and evaluation of oral presentations. In its section on graphic aids, the chapter lists the advantages and disadvantages of each of eight kinds of visual aids, thus providing the speaker with useful guidelines for selecting the appropriate visual for a certain setting.

Michaelson, Herbert B., How to Write & Publish Engineering Papers and Reports, 3rd edition, Oryx, Phoenix, AZ, 1990.

This highly-focused text includes a brief chapter on how to present an engineering paper orally, including advice about how to handle the discussion period. This source contains useful information about how to adapt a written document to an oral presentation.

Pauley, Steven E., and Daniel G. Riordan, Technical Report Writing Today, 4th edition, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA 1990.

The chapter on "Formatting and Visual Aids" contains information about how to produce tables, graphs, illustrations, and charts. In "Oral Reports," the authors discuss planning organizing, and presenting the oral report as well as how to use visual aids.

Pfeiffer, William S., Technical Writing: A Practical Approach, MacMillan, New York, NY, 1991.

"Oral Presentations and Meetings" is a twenty-eight page chapter covering topics not found in most of the other sources. The chapter discusses the importance of oral presentations on the job, gives excellent advice about preparation and delivery, considers how to adapt to large and small audiences, and how to prepare and present graphics. The chapter offers detailed, practical advice about how to deal with nervousness. In addition, the chapter includes a five-page section on running effective meetings, including suggestions about how to avoid common problems.

Philbin, Alice I., and John W. Presley, Technical Writing: Method, Application & Management, Delmar, Albany, NY, 1989.

"Oral Communications and Presentations" is a twenty-four page chapter which discusses purposes of presentations, audience analysis, planning, organization, design of visuals, practice sessions, delivery, and conducting discussions. The examples in the chapter are particularly useful for instructing students in planning oral presentations.

Reep, Diana C., Technical Writing: Principles, Strategies, and Readings, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA, 1991.

In "Oral Presentations," the author discusses understanding organizing, preparing, and delivering reports. Visual elements are briefly considered in the section on delivery. There is also a brief section titled "Joining a Team Presentation" which gives

readers advice about how to plan and manage a group presentation.

Rew, Lois J., Introduction to Technical Writing: Process and Practice, St. Martin's, New York, NY, 1989.

In a fourteen-page chapter titled "Speeches and Oral Presentations," the author discusses types of oral presentations, audience considerations, organization, graphics, and the process of writing a speech. The chapter concludes with a list of references.

Samuels, Marilyn S., The Technical Writing Process, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 1989.

In a six-page chapter titled "Preparing and Delivering Oral Reports," the author discusses situations requiring oral reports, studying the subject of the presentation, planning, delivery, and evaluation. Although the chapter is brief, it raises important points for discussion with students.

Sherman, Theodore A., and Simon S. Johnson, Modern Technical Writing 5th edition, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1990.

In "Oral Presentation of Technical Information," the author discusses preparation, audience adaptation, arrangement of material, preparing notes, use of language and level of diction and style, delivery, and visual aids. There is also a brief section on how to address a large audience and the speaker's projection of attitude.

Stuart, Ann, The Technical Writer, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, NY, 1988.

In a seven-page chapter titled "Speaking Effectively," the author comments on types of oral presentations, organization, equipment, and the use of visuals. In two brief but useful sections, Stuart also discusses how to approach informal presentations and job interviews.

Patricia E. Connors
Associate Professor of English
Memphis State University
Memphis, TN 38152
901-678-2851

Patricia E. Connors is a senior member of STC. She received her doctorate from the University of Detroit. She teaches in the professional/technical writing program at Memphis State University and directs lower division courses in English. She has presented papers at six STC conferences.