The purpose for making an oral presentation is to influence others: to get them to understand your ideas, to consider your point of view, to believe your arguments, to act on your proposal. The challenge is that the people to whom you’re speaking don’t necessarily see the topic or information or issue as you do—they may be less interested, less knowledgeable, less committed. So you must tailor your message to your immediate audience.

To do this, you need to know enough about your listeners – their demographics, experience, knowledge, beliefs, and values – that you can connect with them.

■ Get your listeners interested and make them care.

James Albert Winans, Hamilton 1897 and author of several still-influential books on public speaking, wrote, “We should seek an alliance with our audience by getting on common ground with them.” He suggested that speakers build a relationship with their listeners based on similarities of interests, feelings, and beliefs.

This idea can be found in almost every modern public speaking textbook. In A Speaker’s Guidebook, authors Dan O’Hair, Rob Stewart, and Hannah Rubenstein put it this way:

“Just as friendships are formed by showing interest in others, audiences are won over when speakers express interest in them and show that they share in the audiences’ concerns and goals.”

Associate Professor of Philosophy Katheryn Doran adds, “Present [your subject matter] in a framework that explains why it matters, why it is of interest [to your audience].”

■ Bridge the gaps of knowledge and understanding.

In Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die, Chip and Dan Heath explain how even great expertise can get in the way of communication if the speaker can’t relate to the listeners’ frame of reference:

“Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. Our knowledge has ‘cursed’ us. And it becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can’t readily re-create our listeners’ state of mind.”

The “curse of knowledge,” as they call it, can only be broken by putting yourself in your listeners’ place.

How? Try to identify places in your talk where your immediate audience might need background, context, or definitions.

To convey complex ideas, Professor of Government Paul Gary Wyckoff offers two keys to clarity: “Use their language, not yours.” That is, steer clear of technical terms until you’ve provided a foundation in familiar language. And “break it down. If you can give an idea one step at a time, it is much easier [for listeners] to absorb than if you give them the whole thing at once.”

■ Connect arguments to your audience’s attitudes and beliefs.

Aristotle captured the idea in this aphorism:

“The fool tells me his reasons; the wise man persuades me with my own.”

Since Aristotle’s time, countless experts have echoed his wisdom. In Words That Work: It’s Not What You Say, It’s What People Hear, political consultant Frank Luntz puts it this way:

“You can have the best message in the world, but the person on the receiving end will always understand it through the prism of his or her own emotions, preconceptions, prejudices, and preexisting beliefs. It’s not enough to be correct or reasonable or even brilliant. The key to successful communication is to take the imaginative leap of stuffing yourself right into your listener’s shoes to know what they are thinking and feeling.”
Since all face-to-face presentations have a visual dimension, what the audience sees can make a difference. This is as true for the speaker’s attire and body language as it is for images, graphs, and video: all are out there for the audience to interpret and evaluate. The visual elements should be as purposeful and well-prepared as all the other components of an effective presentation.

### Mind your appearance and body language.

Marshall McLuhan’s familiar maxim “the medium is the message” applies here. You are the medium for your message. How you look and act has a great effect on your audience’s response to your message. Key tips:

- Dress appropriately for the audience and situation. “If you’re going to give a presentation,” says Director of Opportunity Programs Phyllis Breland, “look like you’re going to give a presentation!”

- Make plenty of genuine eye-to-eye contact. “Nothing sucks the life out of a presentation more,” says Associate Professor of Philosophy Katheryn Doran, “than [a speaker who’s] looking at the podium or table (even if there are no notes on it!) or at the professor only or off into the middle distance.” And avoid turning your back on your audience when you refer to your slides on the screen.

- “Keep good posture,” urges Professor of French John O’Neal. “Do not lean on or slump over the lectern.” Good posture conveys confidence and facilitates the deep abdominal breathing needed to project your voice.

- Energize your presentation. Let your enthusiasm show on your face and in your gestures.

### Design visual media to maximize clarity and meaning.

Presentations can gain interest, clarity, and persuasiveness when the speaker’s words are supported by images, maps, diagrams, or visual displays of data. While presentation software makes it easy to create visuals, slides are sometimes so poorly designed or used that they work against the speaker. To make your visuals more effective, apply the following advice:

- “Use fewer words, more pictures,” suggests Assistant Professor of Psychology Alexandra List.

- Limit text to key words and phrases. When you must display lengthier passages, Assistant Professor of Philosophy Russell Marcus says, “Make sure to give your audience time to digest the words you present.”

- Choose text and background colors for good contrast. Avoid busy, distracting slide backgrounds.

- Follow the principle of simplicity: Often a slide can be improved by taking something away rather than adding more.

- “Identify axes, units of measurement, etc., on graphs,” says Professor List. “The audience hasn’t looked at them as long as you have.”

- “Don’t make the audience hunt,” cautions Vice President for Administration and Finance Karen Leach. “Highlight the important data.”

- Be sure your slides pass what presentation expert Nancy Duarte, in her Harvard Business Review blog, calls “the glance test: People should be able to comprehend each one in about three seconds.”

- When complex visuals are needed, take the time to explain them. Tell the audience what they’re looking at, what’s important, and what it means.

- Use animations and other effects only if they serve a purpose and don’t become a distraction.

- “Be sure that what you are saying always corresponds directly to what is on the screen, recommends Professor of History Kevin Grant. “Avoid any disconnect between the oral and the visual.”

- “Why are you showing this slide?” asks Vice President Leach. “Give the audience the message.”
Listeners can't reread, pause, or replay a live talk when they don't get something the speaker says. And listeners are constantly being distracted by personal concerns, environmental stimuli, and a host of other factors at the same time that the speaker is trying to focus and hold their attention.

The speaker, therefore, needs to help the audience by using language and vocal expression to make the presentation as *listenable* as possible. *Listenable* is speechwriter Alan Perlman’s term for the degree to which, for the immediate listening audience, an oral presentation is clear, coherent, meaningful, and easy to follow. To improve the listenability of your presentations, follow these tips:

**Use words and expressions that are clear to the ear.**

Avoid ambiguous pronoun references. They’re bad in writing but even worse in speaking because listeners don’t have the option of looking back over the text to figure them out. For the same reason, steer clear of expressions such as “the former… the latter” and “respectively”—as in “John, Ashley, and Tamika represented the departments of Economics, Biology and English, respectively.”

**Signpost where you are in the talk.**

Signposts are words or phrases that flag major sections of the presentation, such as “The first issue is…” or “My final argument is…” Signposts can also keep listeners on track by telling them what you’re about to do, as in “I want to give you a definition of the two key terms” or “Let’s compare these regression results.”

**Use previews and summaries.**

Previews tell listeners what’s coming next or how you’re going to develop a point. Summaries recap what listeners should remember or take away at the end of the presentation or a section of it.

**Provide clear transitions.**

Transitions make sure no one is confused or left behind when you move from one point to the next. A strong transition shows not only movement but also the logical connection between points. Effective oral transitions often involve a brief recap to close the previous section and a signpost to lead into the next. Changes in vocal expression — pauses, changes in volume or speed—also can help listeners recognize a transition.

**“Project your voice and enunciate clearly.”**

So urges Professor of French John O’Neal. Speaking too softly or too fast or garbling words can make it hard for listeners to decode what you’re saying. So speak up, slow down, and make your words clear and distinct, paying close attention to middle and final consonant sounds.

**Use vocal expression to convey the meaning of your words.**

Give your thoughts the phrasing, the pace, and the emphasis that convey what you have in mind. Listeners can’t see your paragraphing and punctuation. Consider: What does a paragraph sound like? What do *italics* sound like? Your listeners depend on you to provide the vocal expressiveness that makes your words clear, interesting, and meaningful.

**Practice until you can present without saying “um” even one time.**

That’s the advice of Barbara Tewksbury, Upson Chair of Public Discourse and Professor of Geosciences.

Try this: Record yourself, then watch the replay and count the “filler” words in a short segment of your talk, say thirty seconds. Notice where the "likes" and "ums" occur and try replacing them with silence or transitional words. Like a musician working on a difficult passage, practice eliminating the fillers from that one section. That may be all you need to get attuned to your habit and break it.
I wish you to see that public speaking is a perfectly normal act, which calls for no strange, artificial methods, but only for an extension and development of that most familiar act, conversation.

--James Albert Winans, Hamilton 1897

A speech is simply not a speech until it is delivered to an audience, yet that is the part of speech-making that most worries many people. But James Winans, whose conception of delivery still infuses contemporary scholarship and teaching, wanted us to understand that speech delivery is merely an adaptation of something we all do every day quite naturally and effectively.

What Winans saw as essential to effective public speaking was the same quality of communication found in most conversation. “There is no good speaking,” he wrote, “without this conversational quality.”

Hamilton professors agree:

■ “Speak conversationally.”

“Audience members are better able to process your speech if you're talking with them rather than at them,” says Professor of Psychology Jen Borton. If you need a few notes, write them down, but don’t write your talk down verbatim. Even if you memorize the words, you will sound as though you’re reading off invisible notes in your head rather than having a conversation with your audience.”

■ “Think about what you’re saying and try to convey it.”

“Try to actually talk to the audience, not simply recite what you've prepared,” advises Dan Chambliss, Eugene M. Tobin Distinguished Professor of Sociology.

■ “Own the classroom.”

That’s what the best presenters do, observes Professor of Literature and Creative Writing Doran Larson. “They are not muddling or embarrassed but take command of their topic and present it with confidence and with conviction regarding the importance of what they have found.”

■ “Practice, practice, practice.”

That’s the advice of Associate Professor of Government Sharon Rivera. “Develop a thick skin,” she says, “and ask your friends for their suggestions on how to improve.”

“Conversational” suggests naturalness. But Winans cautioned against just doing what comes naturally. Many of us have mannerisms that are natural to us but weaken our communication—we pace aimlessly, speak too fast, gaze at the ceiling, fill too many pauses with “um.” Rehearsal and honest feedback can help us weed out these distracting behaviors and become more comfortable and confident with our message.


■ “Seek opportunities to make presentations, and know your subject cold.”

Edward Walker, the Christian A. Johnson Distinguished Professor of Global Political Theory makes those recommendations. “The day you can speak without notes and stay on course,” he says, “is the day you have begun to master oral presentation.”

Cultivate Your Virtues
No oral presentation can achieve its objective if listeners have doubts about the information or the speaker. To be effective, both the message and the messenger must be believable.

Speakers themselves are persuasive, wrote Aristotle, when they demonstrate practical wisdom, virtue, and good will. Those were the components of “ethos” — what today we call “credibility” and think of as a blend of expertise, trustworthiness, and good intentions. It is important to recognize that credibility is not a stable trait inherent in the speaker but rather a perception formed by one’s audience and subject to revision, even from one moment to the next. As a speaker, then, the success of your presentation depends heavily on how your work, your character, and your intentions are perceived by your listeners.

Build and maintain your credibility by following these suggestions:

- **Do your homework.**
  
  Research thoroughly and know your material.

- **Use reliable resources.**
  
  Critically evaluate all sources, being particularly careful with Internet sources. If you need help, ask a librarian.

- **“Attribute scrupulously.”**
  
  That’s the advice of Burgess Professor of French Bonnie Krueger. “Don’t ever, ever cite an argument or read a passage without careful attribution.” And remember that, for a listener, it’s best if you identify a source at the moment when you are referring to it rather than in a list at the end of the presentation. This allows listeners to judge the credibility of the source and your use of the information when it matters most — as they’re hearing your argument unfold.

- **Consider using local sources.**
  
  Sometimes the best authority is right on campus or in the surrounding community—a professor, a staff member, a public official or business owner, a historical society or service agency. Local sources can add credibility when their insights are not only authoritative but also reflective of the community they share with your listeners. Plus, you may earn some praise from your audience for thinking outside of Google.

- **Tell the audience why you’re qualified to speak on the subject.**
  
  Your major, study abroad, independent research projects, internships, long-term interests and hobbies, even the places you’ve lived and the people you’ve known — all can enhance an audience’s sense of your expertise and competence on relevant topics.

- **Treat your listeners with respect.**
  
  Avoid diminishing, embarrassing, or alienating your listeners over ways in which they differ from you, such as background, identity, education, aspirations, faith, or socioeconomic status. Be considerate of them in making assumptions, choosing examples and arguments, using language, and attempting to be funny.

- **Be honest and clear about the goals of your talk.**
  
  Your listeners should feel that their interests are being served and that they are not being manipulated or deceived.

- **Enjoy yourself.**
  
  “If you convey your enjoyment, enthusiasm, or passion for the subject, Professor Krueger says, you will be a much more convincing speaker.”

Cultivate Your Virtues

Visit the Hamilton College Oral Communication Center.
“Stickiness” is the term used by authors Malcolm Gladwell and, more recently, Chip and Dan Heath to identify the attributes that make messages compelling and memorable. Besides being clearly organized and solidly supported, a sticky presentation is also interesting, meaningful, and relatable for the audience. To enhance your presentation’s stickiness, apply the following advice:

- **Give concrete examples and descriptive details.**

  Reporting on seafood piracy for National Public Radio, Christopher Joyce gave this description: “His fish lie in tubs of crushed ice. Among them are steel-colored tuna and glittering striped bass—and a fish with a yellow stripe like a Nike swoosh.”

- **Use statistics meaningfully.**

  “Don’t numb your audience with numbers,” advises Oral Communication Center Director Jim Helmer. “Avoid giving so many that they become meaningless. And round off when it’s acceptable.”

  Numbers don’t speak for themselves; they need to be explained and interpreted. “How does this group [or time period] compare? Give means, medians, and trends,” says Vice President for Administration and Finance Karen Leach.

  Put numbers into a context that makes them meaningful, as in these examples:

  When Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader spoke at Hamilton in 2000, he talked about our students’ future: “If you’re 20 years old, you’ve got 15,000 days before you retire—a little over 2,000 weeks. Did last week go fast?”

  In his 2010 TED talk on modern slavery, Kevin Bales said the cost of sustainable freedom for the 27 million people enslaved worldwide would be about $10.8 billion. “What Americans spend on potato chips and pretzels. Usually the annual expenditure in this country on blue jeans. Intel’s fourth quarter earnings: 10.8 billion dollars.”

- **Tell stories.**

  A couple of stories don’t make an argument, but an anecdote or story can give reality and meaning to data that are cold, complex, or overwhelming. Stories humanize the facts, making the message more compelling and memorable.

  News media often report on natural disasters and social calamities, for instance, by telling the story of one village or one family. Charitable organizations often tell the story of one person whose life would be transformed by your donation. U.S. presidents even include stories in their annual State of the Union addresses, as President Barack Obama did in 2015 when he talked about how Rebekah and Ben Erler, a young Minneapolis couple with a baby on the way, were hit by the 2008 economic collapse and how they bounced back.

  Even a research report can be engaging and memorable if you tell it as a story: how you became curious about the topic, what mystery you wanted to unravel, why it was interesting or important to you, how you approached it, and what you discovered.

- **Use analogies.**

  Put unfamiliar ideas and information into a more familiar frame of reference.

  National Geographic writer Jennifer Kahn tried to convey the relative size of a nanometer, which is one-billionth of a meter: “That’s like comparing the size of a marble to the size of the earth….To put it another way, a nanometer is the amount a man’s beard grows in the time it takes him to lift a razor to his face.”

  A river rafting guide described the amount of water flowing past the spot where his party put into the Green River in Colorado: “Right now the flow is about 900 cubic feet per second. One cubic foot is about the size of a Butterball turkey. So imagine 900 Butterball turkeys floating by every second.”

  Speaking in Ohio in 2005, President George W. Bush argued for oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: “We can now reach all of ANWR’s oil by drilling on just 2,000 acres. 2,000 acres is the size of the Columbus airport.”

  There certainly are other ways to create stickiness—surprise, interactivity, humor. Be creative and keep in mind the words of Ann Owen, the Henry Platt Bristol Professor in Public Policy: “Even an Econ presentation should be interesting.”
Listeners appreciate order. They expect a talk to hang together and follow a plan that is clear, consistent, and sensible. And they expect the whole thing to add up to some clear, worthwhile point. To meet these expectations, an effective presentation must be unified and coherent: It should have a clear, concise core message, and every element of the presentation should stick to that message, amplify it, clarify it, and, if it’s an argument, support it.

Create your core message.

The core message is the one point you must get across to your audience; it is your central idea or thesis. To formulate the core message, you need to know more than what your talk is about. Just “talking about” a topic can produce a rambling, disjointed, confusing stream of ideas and information with no clear governing point or purpose. Finding your core message requires knowing where you want your audience to be at the end of your presentation. What do you want your listeners to understand or believe or do? The answer to this question is your core message.

A clear core message is important because it controls the content of your presentation:

- It helps you formulate your ideas and arguments.
- It guides you in selecting the data, examples, stories, comparisons, and testimony that will best develop and support your points. Only the material that helps develop your core message goes into your presentation; everything else goes out.

Organize logically and clearly.

The organizational plan is a key part of your message because it puts your ideas and arguments into their appropriate relationships with each other and with the core message. To achieve a unified and coherent presentation, follow these principles:

- The content of the talk should be composed of units of information, thought, or argument that follow a clear and logical sequence, such as problem-solution, cause-effect, chronology, scientific method, etc.
- Each major unit of thought should clearly relate to the core message and develop or support it by adding essential ideas and evidence.
- Taken together, these units of thought should complete —fully develop or support —your core message.

Craft an effective introduction and conclusion.

Richard Bedient, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor and Chair of Mathematics observes that “the major problem [in students’ presentations] is rushing through the introduction and conclusion and spending too much time on the details in the middle.” But beginnings and endings are essential to framing the details and ensuring that listeners see the big picture.

The introduction should arouse audience interest, reveal the topic and why it’s important, and provide a sense of direction or what to expect. The conclusion should summarize the message, drive it home, and bring the talk to a close.

The opening and closing of a presentation can be crucial in creating unity and coherence, but they are sometimes challenging for a speaker to create. “Start with an interesting point or engaging statement, rather than ‘So, my topic is...’” says Professor of Biology Sue Ann Miller. “Close with conclusions...and where research might go next.”

Jen Borton, Professor of Psychology, suggests, “Begin with a hook—usually a brief story or related current event. At the end of your talk, tie your conclusion back to the opening hook to show how everything fits together.”