

The Seven Cardinal Virtues of Oral Presentation

VIRTUE No. 1

AUDIENCE-CENTEREDNESS

Tailor your message to your listeners.

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.”

Cultivate Your Virtues

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