

# The Seven Cardinal Virtues of Oral Presentation

## VIRTUE

### No. 2

## UNITY AND COHERENCE

*Select and arrange every element of your talk to communicate a clear, concise core message.*

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.”

## Cultivate Your Virtues

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