

The Seven Cardinal Virtues of Oral Presentation

VIRTUE No. 3

STICKINESS

Make your ideas compelling and memorable.

“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.”

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