

The Seven Cardinal Virtues of Oral Presentation

VIRTUE No. 4

CREDIBILITY

Establish trust in yourself and your information.

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.