

The Seven Cardinal Virtues of Oral Presentation

VIRTUE No. 5

CONVERSATIONAL DELIVERY

Speak to your listeners as if you are conversing with them.

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.

"Be yourself," says presentation expert Nancy Duarte in her *Harvard Business Review* blog. But she reminds us that "Authentic presentations take practice."

■ "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

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