

The Seven Cardinal Virtues of Oral Presentation

VIRTUE No. 6

LISTENABILITY

Use clear language and expressive voice.

Listeners can't reread, pause, or replay a live talk when they don't get something the speaker says. And listeners are constantly being distracted by personal concerns, environmental stimuli, and a host of other factors at the same time that the speaker is trying to focus and hold their attention.

The speaker, therefore, needs to help the audience by using language and vocal expression to make the presentation as *listenable* as possible. *Listenability* is speechwriter Alan Perlman's term for the degree to which, for the immediate listening audience, an oral presentation is clear, coherent, meaningful, and easy to follow. To improve the listenability of your presentations, follow these tips:

■ Use words and expressions that are clear to the ear.

Avoid *ambiguous pronoun references*. They're bad in writing but even worse in speaking because listeners don't have the option of looking back over the text to figure them out. For the same reason, steer clear of expressions such as "the former...the latter" and "respectively"—as in "John, Ashley, and Tamika represented the departments of Economics, Biology and English, respectively."

■ Signpost where you are in the talk.

Signposts are words or phrases that flag major sections of the presentation, such as "The first issue is..." or "My final argument is..." Signposts can also keep listeners on track by telling them what you're about to do, as in "I want to give you a definition of the two key terms" or "Let's compare these regression results."

■ Use previews and summaries.

Previews tell listeners what's coming next or how you're going to develop a point. Summaries recap what listeners should remember or take away at the end of the presentation or a section of it.

■ Provide clear transitions.

Transitions make sure no one is confused or left behind when you move from one point to the next. A strong transition shows not only movement but also the logical connection between points. Effective oral transitions often involve a brief recap to close the previous section and a signpost to lead into the next. Changes in vocal expression — pauses, changes in volume or speed—also can help listeners recognize a transition.

■ "Project your voice and enunciate clearly."

So urges **Professor of French John O'Neal**. Speaking too softly or too fast or garbling words can make it hard for listeners to decode what you're saying. So speak up, slow down, and make your words clear and distinct, paying close attention to middle and final consonant sounds.

■ Use vocal expression to convey the meaning of your words.

Give your thoughts the phrasing, the pace, and the emphasis that convey what you have in mind. Listeners can't see your paragraphing and punctuation. Consider: What does a paragraph *sound* like? What do *italics* sound like? Your listeners depend on you to provide the vocal expressiveness that makes your words clear, interesting, and meaningful.

■ Practice until you can present without saying "um" even one time.

That's the advice of **Barbara Tewksbury, Upson Chair of Public Discourse and Professor of Geosciences**.

Try this: Record yourself, then watch the replay and count the "filler" words in a short segment of your talk, say thirty seconds. Notice where the "likes" and "ums" occur and try replacing them with silence or transitional words. Like a musician working on a difficult passage, practice eliminating the fillers from that one section. That may be all you need to get attuned to your habit and break it.

Cultivate Your Virtues

Visit the Hamilton College Oral Communication Center.