
UNIT 15 ORAL PRESENTATION SKILLS AND PUBLIC SPEAKING – 2

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

- to understand how to use language that is easy to listen to,
- to gain an insight into how some common thematic structures underlie common topics in speeches,
- to find a balance between public politeness and private emotions that is pleasing and healthy in public speaking, and
- to understand the structure of a corporate presentation.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

The language of a spoken presentation or talk must sound like spoken language: it should not be “bookish”, or full of long-winded sentences in which both you and your audience get lost. A good spoken presentation is achieved only after much preparation. Simple writing is in fact the most complex writing. We shall consider here only a very few common ways of rephrasing clumsy or complicated writing. If you begin to pay attention to how sentences are put together, you can learn to

look at good pieces in the magazines and newspapers to see how they are constructed, and begin to imitate them.

We shall also give you a couple of sample speeches and help you to see how they are constructed. But the only way to learn to speak is by speaking, so we encourage you to take the opportunity now to make those short speeches wherever you can! In the beginning, you may just try to ask a question at a talk. Write the question down, and then speak without looking at what you have written. Volunteer to give a vote of thanks or an introduction. Above all, practice and rehearse your speech, by yourself, or with your friends and then, after you have spoken, listen carefully to any criticism or feedback you receive. Read and re-read this unit before and after you speak, to evaluate yourself.

15.2 LANGUAGE CONTENT: HELPING YOUR AUDIENCE LISTEN

A speech or presentation should use ‘spoken language’ rather than ‘written language’. The choice of words should be formal but not so literary or scholarly as to be unfamiliar to many people. Our words should be arranged in such a way that the listener does not need to strain his or her memory to make sense of what we say.

Throughout this course we mention ways of developing the ability to write or speak simple, good English. This ability is not cultivated in a day; there are no short cuts to good speaking and writing. However, we mention below a few common clues that you can use to monitor your own speaking and writing. A good exercise is to take a piece that you think is well written, and try to rewrite it from memory. Another is to look out for badly written pieces in the newspapers, and identify the problems in them – such as those we list below.

After a concert, a listener rushed up to a famous violinist and gushed, “I’d give up my whole life to play as beautifully as you did”.

Replied the maestro, “I did”.

15.2.1 Use Short, Simple Sentences

15.2.1.1 Avoid Using too Many Subordinate Clauses

Instead of saying: Ms. XYZ, who was born in Kadapa and educated in Chennai, where she got an engineering degree from the prestigious IIT, has travelled all over the world.

You can say: Ms. XYZ was born in Kadapa and educated in Chennai at the prestigious IIT. After graduating with an engineering degree, she has travelled all over the world.

Instead of saying: This product, which was originally manufactured in the USA before being taken over by a Korean company which started to sell it at a lower price because of more efficient management and lower labour costs, is now available on our shelves for the first time in India as a result of our collaboration with our South East Asian neighbours and following our policy of bringing world-class products to our Indian consumers at a reasonable price.

You can say: This product is now available on our shelves for the first time in India. It is our policy to bring world-class products to our Indian consumers at a reasonable price. So we are collaborating with our South East Asian neighbours,

and the result is here for you to see. We must mention that this product was originally manufactured in the USA. Our Korean partner took it over and was able to sell it at a lower price, because of more efficient management and lower labour costs.

15.2.1.2 Avoid Using the -ing Forms of Verbs, or Noun-like Verbs; and Passives

The previous example also shows how

- thoughts must be separated and presented in a logical or chronological order, instead of being run together
- when thoughts are separated in this way, the forms of verbs become less ‘nominal’. Contrast these verb phrases in the two versions of the last example:

... before being taken over by a Korean company	Our Korean partner took it over
... following our policy of bringing world-class products to our Indian consumers	It is our policy to bring world-class products to our Indian consumers
... as a result of our collaboration with our South East Asian neighbours we are collaborating with our South East Asian neighbours, and the result is ...

15.2.1.3 Place Subjects and Verbs Close Together

Instead of saying: This product, which has been much appreciated and received very well in the Indian market, comes to you with a guarantee for two years.

You can say: This product comes to you with a guarantee for two years. Perhaps this is why the product has been much appreciated. It has been received very well in the Indian market.

15.2.1.4 Place Objects and Verbs Close Together

Instead of saying: We must give a product that is reliable, trouble-free, has resale value and can be upgraded if necessary at a reasonable price to the consumer.

You can say: We must give to the consumer a product that is reliable, trouble-free, has resale value and can be upgraded if necessary.

15.2.2 Limit Pronoun Use

Listeners may have a hard time remembering or understanding what “it”, “they”, or “this” refers to. Be specific and use a noun instead of unclear pronouns.

Collect your own examples of unclear pronoun use from the daily newspapers and magazines. For example:

Many people are unaware of the hidden costs of higher education, which I am now going to speak about.

Is the speech about the hidden costs of higher education, or about the fact or opinion that many people are unaware of the hidden costs of higher education?

Look at these two sentences from a newspaper article:

Hindus in various states of India celebrate the new year in their own ways. And not all of these fall on the same day!

The intended referent of these is perhaps 'the new year festivals'. But in the earlier sentence there is no such plural noun; the plural nouns are Hindus, states, and ways. This is an example of careless writing.

15.3 SOME SAMPLE SPEECHES

15.3.1 A Persuasive Speech

Global Warming

[Begin with well-known, uncontroversial facts that state your thesis]

There is little doubt that the planet is warming. Over the last century, the earth's temperature has risen by around 1 degree Fahrenheit (0.6 of a degree Celsius). The warmest years since the mid 1800's were the 1990s. The hottest years recorded were 1997, 1998, 2001, 2002, and 2003.

[Project the future from the present, and sound the note of warning]

The United Nations panel on climate change projects that by the end of the century temperatures will rise by 3-10 degrees Fahrenheit. This will make the polar ice caps melt. If the ice caps melt, the danger is not only to countries like Bangladesh, which are almost at sea level. All countries will lose some land near their borders.

...

[Conclude by providing some ideas for a solution]

Is there anything that ordinary people can do to avert the dangers I have mentioned above, and save our earth from a catastrophic end? Indeed there is. Let me now mention a few simple steps everyone can take.

[Gather material for these solutions by doing some research. The points below were gathered from an internet site on how to make speeches! But it is always good to go to "primary sources"; that is, research reported by the researchers themselves, for your facts. Keep a list of references for your sources in your notebook, so that if your facts are challenged, you can respond by quoting the authority on which you based your claims.]

Firstly, plant a tree... we need trees to cool our planet and yet they are chopping them down to create roads or homes.

The next time you get into your car, or onto your motorbike, think - do I have to make this journey by vehicle or can I walk?

If possible, buy your fruit and vegetables from local suppliers. This reduces transport costs and the resulting pollution as well.

Keep to the speed limit. The more you speed the more petrol you are going to use, making the pollution higher. Also, SUV's make about six times their own weight in carbon dioxide each year. A small efficient diesel car covering the same distance not only uses much less fuel; it makes two thirds less carbon dioxide.

If possible use solar energy. After all it is free; all you need to spend on is the equipment. You can get much of your hot water and heating from the sun and even generate electricity.

Reduce, reuse and recycle. Only buy what you need; don't stock the cupboards with things you may or may not use. Reuse whatever you can, like containers and paper, and recycle what you cannot reuse. It really is as simple as that.

Finally, turning off unused sources of power such as televisions and heaters will help the environment, as well as save you money.

15.3.2 Speech for a Colleague Who is Retiring

This is a farewell speech. The outline can be adapted to other such occasions, such as a young colleague leaving the organization for another one, or a college senior who is graduating.

[Begin by marking the day, i.e. describing the occasion.]

Welcome, everyone, to this very special occasion. It's a bitter-sweet occasion. But then, that is life. I remember how on our new year's day we used to be given a little ball of sweet jaggery along with some tender but bitter neem leaves, to symbolize that in life we need to take the bitter along with the sweet. Today is one such occasion.

[Look forward]

It's very sad to be saying goodbye to — . But – at the same time – we know that (s)he leaves us in good health, and that (s)he looks forward to ... (*here mention* something positive that you have found out that the retiring person looks forward to or wants to do, *e.g.*,

- many years of a happy retired life with the family
- spending more time with children and grandchildren living abroad
- doing those things that (s)he had no time for when (s)he was busy at work, such as ...
- travelling to ...
- continuing working with you as a consultant and senior advisor ...)

[Look back with gratitude, nostalgia ...]

Ever since (s)he joined us all those years ago – in, — has ...

(*here mention* some roles that the person has been prominent in, some work that everyone can remember him or her for. What is the person's legacy?

It may be a prominent one, like a scheme or product (s)he is known for. But it may also be a very quiet, consistent devotion to duty, which is unusual in its unselfishness, and worth emulating.

You may find it useful to discuss this with a few colleagues before you make the speech: what do they remember the person for the most?

- For being always on time?
- For always being prepared with an umbrella in the rainy season (and perhaps holding it over the head of other colleagues when they needed it?)
- For knowing all the rules and regulations?

- For being the first to fight for the rights of the underdog?

And so on.)

You may also mention here any special relationship you have had with the person – was he or she your mentor, boss, senior colleague? What did you learn from him or her?

[Optionally, you may look forward again to your own role, after this person's retirement]

This organization will be a much emptier place without —, but it will be an honour to take up the baton as her/his successor and I promise to try and live up to her/his extraordinarily high standards...

[Say a final, brief, pleasant goodbye that refers to the future again]

- Although we are saying goodbye to —, this will not be the last we see of him/her. ...
- I know we all look forward to hearing about all his/her holiday ...
- we shall be visiting him often ...
- I would like to wish you all the very best on behalf of all of us. We really hope you have a wonderful trip to .../ wonderful time with ... !

15.3.3 Sample Response

Well thank you, —, for those kind words.

[Look back with nostalgia]

It was indeed — years ago that I came nervously through the doors here ... I remember how I trembled and wanted to turn right round and head out! But I stayed, and it was like a roller coaster ride ...

[Here recall a few memorable or funny moments]

[Sound a note of thanks to conclude the memories with]

I only want to say a few words myself – I've done enough speaking for a lifetime! But I do want to tell you how much I have appreciated some of the things that make this company so special – not just the business side, but the fun and laughter we have had – especially the long nights labouring away at last minute documents and deals, the cups of tea,

[Look forward not for yourself but for your former colleagues and friends, and wish them well]

I am leaving but I will be watching your progress with interest and I shall indeed be back. I am certain you will all go on to achieve far better things than I did. If my legacy to you was time spent building this firm up, your legacy to me is one of comradeship and teamwork. ...

And thank you for the wonderful present – it is just what I wanted!!

Thank you.

15.4 DEALING WITH NEGATIVE EMOTIONS, ATTITUDES AND EXPERIENCES

You may be wondering whether the people in the sample speeches above live in a perfect world where only good things happen. Or is it the case that on public occasions we must say only the good things and ignore all unpleasantness?

None of our experiences are all good or all bad. The convention is to remember the good times together and forget and forgive the bad moments we had. This is in fact how we remember our own lives – our childhood looks rosy to us now, but perhaps it was not all fun and games when we were going through it! Our relationships with our parents and siblings are not always smooth. When we recall the good times, we implicitly acknowledge that the times were good overall, on balance with the bad ones.

However, sometimes it looks insincere, artificial and awkward if we simply pretend that only good things happened between the person we are speaking about and ourselves; especially if it is common knowledge that there has been bitterness and acrimony. Think, for example, of what a trade union leader might say when a company boss retires. Theirs are naturally adversarial positions. There are many times in our professional life when we find ourselves in such opposing positions. What can we say about an adversary that sounds sincere and yet not unpleasant?

Notice that we are assuming that something has to be said by you. There are ways to avoid saying anything at all, by remaining silent, or by absenting yourself from a function if you have a good excuse to do so. But these avoidance strategies may be very transparent, and lay you open to criticism. They may smack of disrespect or arrogance. A better strategy may be to take the plunge and say a few words after all. Here are some suggestions about how to handle the situation.

Be open, but keep the references to the bad times brief. Refer to them with a twinkle in your eye, taking the audience into your confidence. “Mr. Mohan and I have had our differences, as you are all aware ...”

Point out that these were professional differences, not personal ones. “... but these differences were (a consequence/ a natural outcome) of (the roles we played in the organization/ our different perceptions about what shape our plans should assume)...”

Acknowledge that the world is full of different kinds of people; you are not always right; you can learn from each other. “We did not hesitate to share with each other our very different ideas about how to achieve our goals ...” “We had differences in our styles of interaction and had to learn to get to know one another...” “I learnt from him the art of keeping the conversation going, and he learnt from me that actions speak louder than words ...” “He grew up in a time when things were put down on paper in triplicate, and I was born in the era of computers and email ...”

Above all, use humour to defuse the tension. “Well I never thought, Mr. Mohan, that I would be saying these nice things about you! / I never dreamed, Mr. Sohan, that you would say such nice things about me!” “When we had a disagreement, I always let him/her have the last word, because he is bigger than me/ he is a trained judo practitioner/ she is a lady, and I am a gentleman ...”

In short, your preparation for a farewell speech is also a process of thinking through and resolving any conflicts you might have had with the person, in a larger spirit of humanism: acknowledging differences, forgiving mistakes, and looking forward with hope, rather than looking back with bitterness. This, after all, is the difference

between the politician and the statesman. The statesman acknowledges the good in his rival or adversary, and recognizes that both of them are playing their roles on the world stage to the best of their abilities.

✓ **Check Your Progress 1**

It is your sister's 21st birthday party. You have been asked to say a few words at this gathering consisting of family and friends. Make a few notes about what you would like to say.

15.5 PRESENTATIONS BY MANAGERS, SALES EXECUTIVES, ETC.

In managing a project, presentations are a formal method for bringing people together to plan, monitor and review its progress. A presentation puts you on display. Your staff need to see your planning and leadership skills. Project leaders from other sections need to be persuaded about the merits of your project, to provide any necessary support. Senior management need to be impressed by your skill and ability so that they provide the resources for you and your team to get the job done. A presentation allows you to ask questions and to initiate discussion.

“The objective of communication is not the transmission but the reception.” The whole preparation, presentation and content of a speech must therefore be geared to the audience. The average human being has a very short attention span and a million other things to think about. Your job in the presentation is to reach through this mental fog and to hold the attention long enough to make your point.

It is difficult to over estimate the importance of careful preparation. Five minutes on the floor in front of senior management could decide the acceptance of a proposal of several months' duration for the manager and the whole team. With so much potentially at stake, the presenter must concentrate not only upon the facts being presented but upon the style, pace, and tone. As a rule of thumb for an average presentation, no less than 1 hour should be spent in preparation for 5 minutes of talking.

Presentations are one of the first managerial skills - Gerard M Blair, author of Starting to Manage: the essential skills

15.5.1 The Objective

Suppose you have a talk to give, where do you start?

The starting point in planning any speech is to formulate a precise objective. This should take the form of a simple, concise statement of intent. For example, the purpose of your speech may be to obtain funds, to evaluate a proposal, or to motivate your team. No two objectives will be served equally well by the same presentation; and if you are not sure what you are trying to do, it is unlikely that you will achieve it.

One question is: how many different objectives can you achieve, in say, 30 minutes? The answer: not many. It is far more productive to achieve one goal than to blunder over several. Isolate the essential objective and list at most two others, provided they do not distract from the main one. *Focus is key*. If you do not focus upon your objective, it is unlikely that the audience will.

It has been suggested that longer presentations, such as a 45 minute talk, should have no more than seven objectives. A psychologist, George Miller, has written about “The Magic Number Seven, plus or minus two”. That is, most of us can easily remember between 5 and 9 new things – whether they are digits in a telephone number, or random objects to remember in a party game! So seven is a safe upper limit for the number of points you make in a longer presentation.

15.5.2 The Structure

A presentation has to have a logical structure. The main body must “present an argument”. We shall see more examples of how to structure an argument in the final block of this course. For now, let us say that there must be a beginning, a middle and an end to the presentation. The points must be sequenced and paced so that the audience does not get lost. This is sometimes referred to as **the timeline**. Again, the main points may be delivered in order of increasing (or decreasing) importance: the presentation should **build up** to a climax (or work down from one). Other options are to go **from the simple to the complex**, to **classify your points** under identifiable heads, and to **present a problem and propose a solution**.

You may begin with an “ice-breaker”. This is an introduction that may be a statement of fact (as in the global warming speech given here as example). For the same speech, you can imagine other ice-breakers, such as an activity (asking your audience how many of them walk to work instead of driving, for example; or “when was the last time you took the bus?”), a story, or a joke. The introduction must reflect the objective of the presentation.

You may present your information visually, developing graphs, charts or handouts. In preparing slides, again remember the number seven: seven lines per slide, seven words per line! Preparing a powerpoint presentation in this manner forces you to cut down on useless words and focus on your points.

To conclude the presentation, you provide a summary or a recapitulation of the main points, thank the audience, and offer to answer questions. Pause for about 5 to 10 seconds before you conclude that there are no questions! You must listen to the question carefully. You may repeat it if you wish, to make sure you understand it, and make sure everyone has heard it. Your answer must be directed to the entire audience (not just to the questioner).

Similarly, it helps if you can relate the question back to a point you have made, when you answer it. If you do not know the answer, you may honestly say so. If the question is not very relevant, you may politely indicate this (“this would take me much further afield than what I have said today”, “this is an important topic in itself”); if it is argumentative or disagrees with you, you may try to find a point of common agreement, or agree to disagree, without being rude (“I understand your position, but ...” “I’m glad you raised this issue. I myself prefer to focus on ...”).

15.6 LET US SUM UP

A presentation differs from a report in reflecting the speaker’s personality: it puts the speaker on show. A good presentation has content and delivery that is well-planned and executed. Preparation is the key.

The language of the presentation is important. There are ways to structure your sentences so that the listener does not have strain the memory, and is not confused about who you are speaking about. Equally important are the structure and objectives of a presentation. A presentation must have a clear and limited number of objectives and a well-thought out logical structure

Repeated rehearsal and careful preparation are the key to learning how to make a presentation. Practice in making presentations and speeches is also essential. Rehearsing and presenting your work will help you to overcome your nervousness, and teach you how to answer any questions your audience may have. At the outset you will find that all your focus is on yourself – what do I say? How do I say it? Will I make a fool of myself? How will the audience judge me? As you get into the activity of preparing and delivering presentations, your focus will shift to the audience: did I make them understand my points? Did I pitch my talk at their level? How else could I have convinced them about what I was saying? When your focus shifts in this manner to what you say and to whom you say it, you will find yourself becoming a communicator.

15.7 FURTHER READING

Those who have access to the Internet can find a number of sites devoted to presentation skills by searching for the keywords “leadership”, “presentation skills,” etc. We found helpful a site www.presentationhelper.co.uk called “presentation helper”. A site on leadership also covered a range of topics mentioned here and in other units in this course, such as The Body, The Voice, Active Listening, etc.

We consulted for one section of this unit a site by Gerard M Blair, a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Electrical Engineering, The University of Edinburgh. His book *Starting to Manage: the essential skills* is published by Chartwell-Bratt (UK) and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (USA). He also lists the following references, while emphasizing that users must do their own research to find the latest publications on this topic:

Boone, Louis E., David L. Kurtz, and Judy R. Block. *Contemporary Business Communication*. Prentice-Hall, 1997.

Ehrlich, Henry. *Writing Effective Speeches*. Marlowe, 1994.

To fail to prepare is to prepare to fail.

15.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

The key to a 21st birthday speech is to keep it short and humorous. Nobody ever complained about a speech being too short! People will want to get on with the party.

It is best to start off with a little praise, with some of the positive attributes: “I’m proud to have such a lovely/ smart/ successful/ loving person for my sister. Suman has a great sense of humour/ is better at mathematics than I could ever be/ is already a valued member of a very prestigious organization/ has cared for all the children and dogs in our neighbourhood ever since I can remember ...”

and then to bring in a few funny anecdotes from her childhood (one, two or three): “Looking at this beautiful/ confident/ serene/ quiet/ smart young lady today, I find it hard to believe she is the same person who (used to sneak under my desk in the schoolroom, to escape the chemistry teacher/ cut up the pictures of my favourite film stars because I wouldn’t tell her a story ...) Again, the stories you tell may be slightly embarrassing – suggesting that she wouldn’t behave like that today, would she? – but they must not be unpleasant, suggesting that she was mean or offensive, or is stupid. You may at this stage also want to bring out some photos of her growing up – especially if they look different from how she looks now.

End the speech with words along the line of how she has grown up to be a lovely/ kind/ beautiful/ kind/ considerate girl and you are proud that she is your sister.