Sharpen Your Oral Communication Skills!

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This article is featured in *Lessons in Conservation*, the official journal of the Network of Conservation Educators and Practitioners (NCEP). NCEP is a collaborative project of the American Museum of Natural History's Center for Biodiversity and Conservation (CBC) and a number of institutions and individuals around the world. *Lessons in Conservation* is designed to introduce NCEP teaching and learning resources (or "modules") to a broad audience. NCEP modules are designed for undergraduate and professional level education. These modules—and many more on a variety of conservation topics—are available for free download at our website, ncep.amnh.org.

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ABSTRACT

In this exercise, you will learn about the elements and criteria that define successful oral presentations. Using a "rubric" or assessment guide, you will evaluate a 15-minute student presentation. In the process, you will review and reflect on what is required for effective oral communication, so that you can use that knowledge to improve your own skills and future performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this exercise, you will learn about the elements and criteria that define successful oral presentations. Using a "rubric" or assessment guide, you will evaluate a 15-minute student presentation. In the process, you will review and reflect on what is required for effective oral communication, so that you can use that knowledge to improve your own skills and future performance.

1.1. Steps

1. Review the Oral Communication rubric (Appendix 1). This rubric, or guide, outlines five key criteria for preparing and evaluating oral presentations: Organization, Content and Supporting Evidence, Student Comprehension, Delivery and Language, and Visual Aids and Text. Read each criterion carefully.

2. Watch the video of a presentation provided by your instructor. Keep the key criteria in mind as you watch, and after the presentation is over, use the rubric as a guide to assign a score between 1 and 4 for each of the criteria accordingly. In addition, you may want to read some tips on how to make visual presentations (Appendix 2) that can help you with some criteria of your assessment.

3. Discuss your results with your neighbor, and then with the rest of the class.

4. Finally, considering your past oral presentations and any feedback you have received from instructors, identify specific areas in the rubric where there is room for you to improve.[1] Please write out a 1 to 3 paragraph answer to the following question and submit it to your instructor for the next class meeting.

Which of the presentation criteria/elements do you think is the most challenging for you, and what could you do to overcome that difficulty?

REFERENCES

[AAC&U] Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2009. Inquiry and analysis VALUE rubric. Association of American Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC, USA. Available from https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/inquiry-analysis (accessed January 2012).

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[1] If applicable, refer to the rubric used to evaluate and provide feedback on your past presentations in class, and/or any video recordings of your performance.

APPENDIX 1

Table 1. Oral Communication Rubric.[2] *Oral communication involves a prepared, purposeful presentation designed to increase knowledge, to foster understanding, or to promote change in the listeners' attitudes, values, beliefs, or behaviors. Levels of achievement (1–4) range from Beginning to Exemplary.*

	1	2	3	4
Organization	Presentation is very hard to follow, with no evident organization.	Presentation is somewhat organized, but not easy to follow. Several ideas seem out of place or irrelevant.	Presentation is clearly organized, easy to follow. One or two ideas seemed out of place or irrelevant to the question.	Presentation is clearly organized and easy to follow, with a specific introduction and conclusion, and clear transitions. No information seems out of place or irrelevant.
Content and Supporting Evidence	Content is not directly relevant to the assigned topic. Presentation does not include adequate evidence supporting the presenter's arguments or includes irrelevant evidence. Student does not provide sources of evidence.	Some of the content is not relevant to the assigned topic. Some of the arguments/results are insufficiently supported by evidence or research seems insufficient. Some of the evidence used seems inaccurate, derived from poor quality sources, or is unrelated to the topic. Student does not provide sources for all the evidence.	Most of the content is directly relevant to the topic. Sufficient, supporting evidence included for each argument. Inaccuracies, if present, are minor. Most evidence properly cited, but of mixed quality or from a limited variety of sources.	All of the presentation is on topic. All evidence brought to bear on the question seems accurate, derived from high quality sources, and relates to the topic, allowing greater understanding. Includes a variety of high quality and relevant supporting evidence, properly cited.
Student Comprehension	Student displays minimal understanding of the subject, provides no explanation, or a minimal explanation, of any supporting evidence, and fails to leave audience with clear and comprehensive take-home message.	Student displays some understanding of the subject, attempts to explain supporting evidence but does so incompletely or erroneously in some cases, and/or provides audience with a take-home message that is not sufficiently clear or comprehensive.	Student displays near-complete understanding of the subject, clearly explains most of the supporting evidence, and provides the audience with a clear, comprehensive take-home message.	Student displays a complete understanding of the subject, clearly explains all of the supporting evidence, and ends with a clear, comprehensive, and compelling take-home message.
Delivery and Language	Delivery techniques detract from the understanding of the presentation. Speaker appears uncomfortable, uses speech crutches, or uses language inappropriate for the context. Speaks too low to be heard. Talks too fast or too slow most of the time.	Delivery techniques make the presentation understandable, but speaker appears uncertain, occasionally uses inappropriate language, or does not speak loudly enough. Student talks too fast or too slow during some sections.	Delivery techniques make the presentation interesting and speaker appears comfortable. Appropriate language and volume used. Student talks too fast or too slow part of the time but spoke at a generally appropriate pace.	Delivery techniques make the presentation compelling and speaker appears polished and confident. Appropriate, clear language and volume used for the audience. Student demonstrates an appropriate, moderate pace effectively in all sections.
Visual Aids and Text	Presentation includes many images/diagrams that are confusing, irrelevant to the topic, or detract from presentation clarity. Text is excessive, cluttered, hard to read, or irrelevant on most slides.	Presentation includes some images/diagrams that are confusing, irrelevant to the topic, or detract from presentation clarity. Text is excessive, cluttered, hard to read, or irrelevant on some slides.	With 1-2 exceptions, the presentation includes clear, relevant images and diagrams that enhance understanding of the topic. Most slides have an appropriate amount of text and precise and relevant information.	All of the images/diagrams are clear, relevant, visually pleasing, and enhance understanding of the topic and convey information more effectively. All slides have an appropriate amount of text and precise and relevant information.
Timing	Time not used effectively. Presentation substantially over or below the allotted time.	Presentation slightly over or below the allotted time. Time distribution among sections inappropriate in relation to section importance.	Student does not exceed the allotted time, but time distribution for sections could improve.	Appropriate and sufficient time is allocated to each part of the presentation.

[2]*Modified From The AAC&U Value Rubric By The Network of Conservation Educators and Practitioners.*

APPENDIX 2: ORAL PRESENTATION SUGGESTIONS

1. Principles of Good Speaking with a Visual Presentation

Despite the presence of visual media, principles of good speaking also apply to presentations that incorporate slides prepared with PowerPoint, Keynote, or other similar software. These visual tools should only enhance your presentation—not to substitute for it.

1. *Focus on the content*: As the saying goes, "The main thing is to keep to the main thing." Do not let the use of the media hinder you in addressing your topic.
2. *Do not read from the screen*: Overly relying on the presence of the text is by far the most common problem with novice presenters. Your audience can, and should be able to read for themselves. Additionally, reading from the screen prevents you from elaborating beyond what they see—do not limit your presentation to the screen. Consider providing additional information and clarifying your comments.
3. *Maintain depth*: Due to the nature of the media, it's easy to resort to citing facts. However, are you also providing interpretation? Let the slides assist you in conveying complex ideas to your audience.
4. *Maintain eye contact with your audience*: It is very easy to be distracted by the content on your screen. A minor exception to this guideline is a need to draw your audience's attention to a specific part of your slide. For example, you could use a pointer to identify a trend of a graph. Otherwise, there's no reason to show your back.
5. *Keep pace with yourself*: At first, you may find it difficult to coordinate speaking and showing your slides simultaneously. However, coordination of the two is essential in preventing confusion. *Practice* before giving presentation. You may find it helpful to make notes to yourself of when you need to advance slides. Doing so minimizes the need to look at the screen itself.
6. *Remain succinct*: Slides should be used for communicating concisely. Packing too much content in a single slide could be confusing. For example, writing 20 word paragraphs on a slide defeats the objective of digital slides. Bullet points are more effective than whole sentences.
7. *Make your slides count*: Is the slide necessary? If not, omit it or combine it with another slide.

2. Design Tips: Make It Easy on the Eyes

Visual presentations should be easily readable. Although certain formatting may look appealing at first, you should consider several issues before completing your presentation.

1. *Font size*: Font size 18 to 24 point or larger ensures that those in the back of the room can easily read the text. If you require a smaller size to accommodate the amount of text, consider writing fewer words instead.
2. *Use contrast*: Many people find that reading dark text on a light background is easier to read than light text on a dark background. Whatever template you use or customize, ensure that you provide an adequate contrast in color. On a yellow background, dark blue font is much more readable than a white font.

3. Prevent Distraction: Minimize Bells and Whistles!

Your priority should be to create a presentation with substantive content rather than a hyperactive show. The overuse of eye-catching features is distracting and could even be annoying. Do not be embarrassed by content-filled slides without fancy multimedia. The most effective animation involves a simple point-by-point side "fly-in" or "appear." A good motto: "Don't do it just because you know how to!"

1. *Incorporate figures and powerful graphics*: PowerPoint or similar software is ideal for providing diagrams and conceptual representations that help illustrate your ideas and enhance your presentation. Note, however, that the overuse of large images reduces your amount of usable screen space for text and stock images could be inappropriate and irrelevant to your content. Each image should have relevance and proper identification/attribution.
2. *Consistent transitions*: Transitions, those effects

that introduce slides, should be consistent throughout your presentation.

3. *All build effects are not equal*: Like transitions introduce entire slides, build effects introduce bulleted text or graphic objects within a slide. For example, you may choose to have your points "Fly from the right" side. Selections are generally a matter of preference; however, some build effects could divert your audience's attention.

4. *Minimal animation*: Used sparingly, animation lends a dramatic element to a presentation.

5. *Sounds*: Sound should be used minimally—if even at all.

4. Additional Tips

- Plan for each slide to last one minute on average.
- Have slides read from left to right; from top to bottom.
- People see graphics first, then text.
- A logical flow of information is essential.
- Outline and/or summary slides are appropriate for long presentations.
- Use sufficient "white"/blank space.
- Limit use of bold, italics, or underlining.
- Do not write in all UPPERCASE.
- No more than two fonts on a screen (preferably one).
- One main concept per slide.
- No more than five items per screen.
- Background patterns make slides harder to read.
- When creating original images, use high quality equipment/programs.
- Use high enough resolution images to avoid pixelated appearance on large screen.
- Edit files to a reasonable size.
- Remember that the goal is to improve learning.