

Unaccustomed As I Am To

PUBLIC SPEAKING...

Basics of Presentation



By Jack Blum

Authentic Communications

FIRST PRINCIPLES

❶ WHAT YOU SAY AND HOW YOU SAY IT BOTH DEPEND ON WHY YOU SAY IT.

For every presentation, make sure you understand the central purpose behind the speech. Make this as clear and simple as possible. This is a piece of work that often takes time — “simple” is not necessarily “easy”, quite the contrary — but it is essential for your presentation to be effective.

Your purpose will determine the structure of your presentation and lend a natural drive to your delivery. Your personal investment in the “why” will give your audience something to relate to on an emotional level, no matter how apparently dry or technical the content of your presentation.

❷ IT'S STILL A CONVERSATION.

When we converse with one another, our sense of engagement comes quite naturally. We have a dozen ways of scanning the person we're speaking with and gauging their interest and level of involvement. We are constantly looking for signs that they have understood what we've said and are following the story or chain of thought. Speaking in front of a group, whether it's five or five hundred, is basically the same process. The only major difference is that the larger the audience, the longer it takes to make sure everyone is with you.

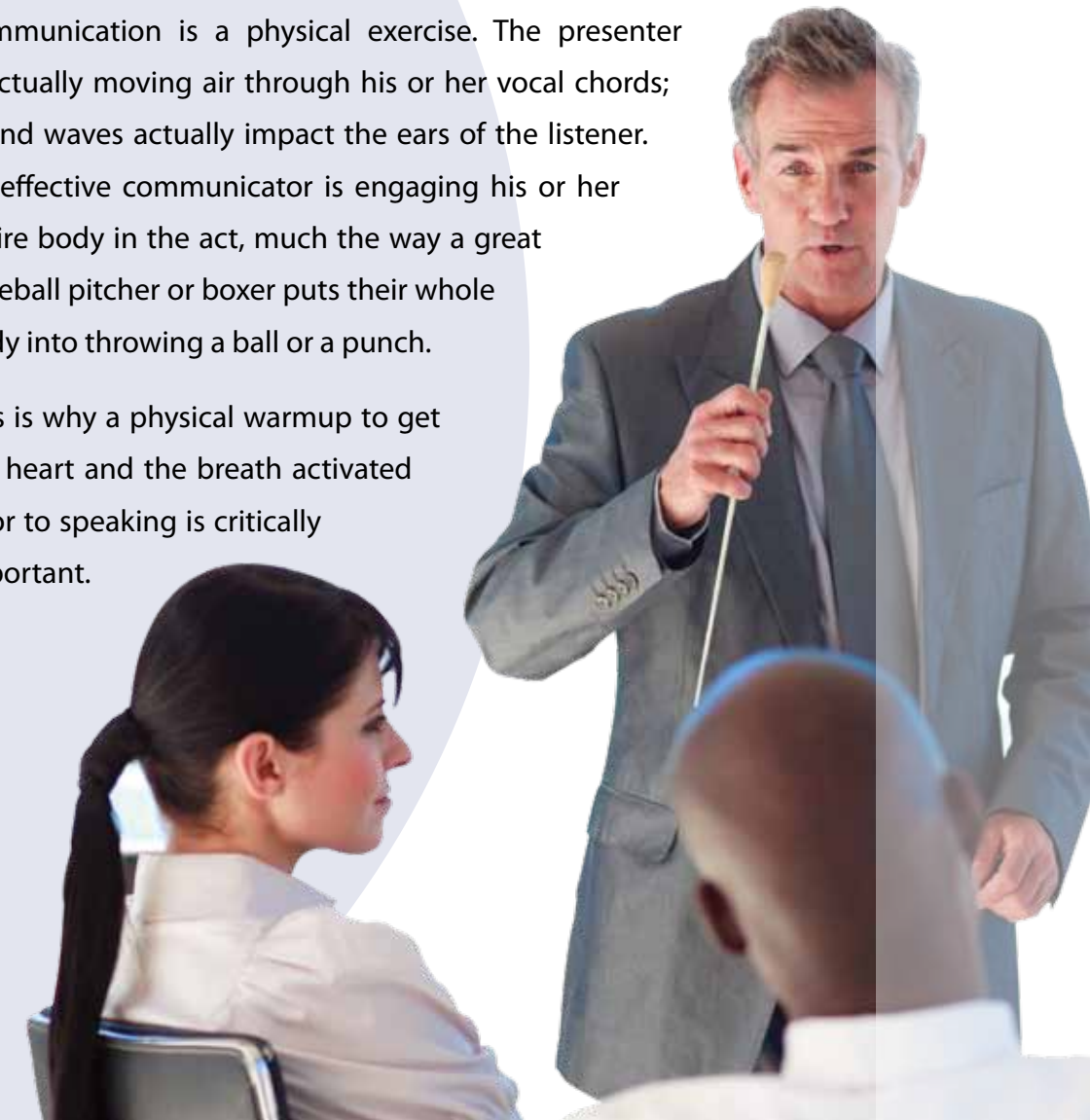
That is why “taking your time” is important: Your pauses give your audience a chance to process what you've said and give you a chance to ensure they are following. Think of your presentation as a conversation and learn to “listen” to your audience by watching for nods, laughs, and other signs of affirmation.

❸ COMMUNICATION IS PHYSICAL.

Communication is a physical exercise. The presenter is actually moving air through his or her vocal chords; sound waves actually impact the ears of the listener.

An effective communicator is engaging his or her entire body in the act, much the way a great baseball pitcher or boxer puts their whole body into throwing a ball or a punch.

This is why a physical warmup to get the heart and the breath activated prior to speaking is critically important.



PREPARATIONS

① GIVE YOURSELF TIME TO WRITE

As with any task, the better prepared you are, the more effective you will be. Writing requires time and quiet space. Even if someone else is drafting a text for you, they need the central themes from you and that requires consideration. Set aside time in your schedule to write, or create a basic outline, or even just to focus on the central purpose of the presentation. Treat it like any other important business appointment and don't procrastinate.

Then set aside more time to reconsider and revise. The best presentations go through several drafts and iterations so the more lead time you give yourself the more opportunity you will have to modify the structure, develop a new idea or add an illustration.



② GIVE YOURSELF TIME TO REHEARSE.

Schedule some rehearsal time and go through the speech out loud several times. At some point, bring in a trusted associate or two to listen to a run through. Nothing gives you a better idea of your material than having someone else actually listen to it. Do this while you still have time to revise what you've done based on what you learn in the rehearsal.



WRITING OR EDITING YOUR SPEECH

In general, every writing/speaking assignment is an exercise in finding and honing your own natural voice. Your completed text should be something that you are most comfortable with and of which you have the most intimate grasp. While the points below are generally good ideas, it is your job to consider them according to how authentic they feel for you.

1 EXPRESS THE CENTRAL POINT

Find a moment very early on to express the central idea that you're going to be exploring. The metaphor of a journey serves to illustrate this. If you are taking everyone for a drive to Montreal, it's a good idea to tell them that before they get on the bus. State your thematic destination early and refer to it at various points along the way.

Ask yourself, "What's the one simple thing I want them to understand and take away when I'm done?" Whatever the answer, never lose sight of it.



2 SIGNPOST THE JOURNEY

Divide your presentation into a few main sections – as few as three and not more than six. (This is a rule of thumb but if you have more than six you probably need to organize your thoughts into larger chunks).

The transition from each section to the next is a great opportunity to remind your audience where you're headed, what you've just told them and why the next section is now important. Do not shy away from reinforcing your central point: That's what you want them to take away.

WRITING OR EDITING YOUR SPEECH

③ ILLUSTRATIONS

There are various ways to give your presentation colour and variety. Human stories can be an extremely entertaining way to illustrate a point, especially if they are from your personal experience. Graphics, photographs and even cartoons can also help. These are an excellent use of PowerPoint slides, as explored further on.

Consider your own personal investment in the presentation and try to trace it to its roots in your own experience or personality. Share that with the audience. If you can make them understand why you care about your topic, you're halfway to making them care about it as well.

Finally, don't be afraid to use your sense of humour. Very little will relax an audience and inspire their confidence in you as much as a bit of laughter, especially off the top.



④ LAYING OUT THE TEXT

There are various options for dealing with notes or a written text but only one absolute taboo:

Do not stand in front of people and read your speech.

If you believe that the words you (or your associate) has written are so brilliant that they need to be spoken verbatim, then you'll have to take the time to memorize the speech completely. But most of us don't have time for that, and neither is it the most relaxed form of presentation.

Generally the most effective and practical way to proceed is with speaking notes. These are bullet points, simple and concise, whose purpose is simply to remind you of the next point you need to make.

However, writing out the full text of your speech is an excellent way to develop your language, structure and trains of thought, even if you will not end up reading the precise text.

Therefore, it is recommended that you do both: Write out the entire speech and then distill each paragraph into the useful bullet points that will keep you on track. When you are actually presenting, refer to the bullet points. But since you also have the written text in front of you, should you lose your train of thought you can refer to that to get you back on track.

SAMPLE SPEECH FORMAT

Text

We live in a time of dynamic change that is affecting all aspects of the power industry: how we produce electricity, how we distribute it, and how we consume it.

There are many ways that consumers can take advantage of new technology and lower their electricity consumption, both for the good of the environment and the health of their pocketbook. But in order to do that, we have to understand this changing power landscape.

First, let's explore the new ways in which we are producing power. Then we'll follow the distribution chain right into your home and talk about how we are consuming electricity and how that shows up on your power bill.

The total supply of power that comes onto the grid is known as the "stack".

Bullets

- all aspects of industry are changing
- can take advantage – environment AND budget
- first understand changes
- will talk through process from production to consumption
- "stack"

Text

In the past, the stack was comprised of hydroelectricity and coal and gas-fired plants. Then nuclear plants were added.

More recently, the threat of climate change has made us all aware of the need to reduce our consumption of fossil fuels. This has led to a new focus on what we call "renewables", mainly wind and solar power.

But wind and solar power are very different from traditional power sources. One of the biggest differences is variability. Just consider: you can wake up in the morning to very light breezes which by the end of the day have turned into 30 km/hour gusts.

This variability has dramatically changed the way the power supply is managed, and some of those changes are visible on your power bill.

Bullets

- in the past, hydro, gas, coal
- climate change
- "renewables"
- wind/solar
- big difference:
- variability
- morning light breeze; evening gusts
- affects your bill

WRITING OR EDITING YOUR SPEECH

5 PowerPoint PRESENTATION

PowerPoint presentation software is one of the most widely used — and misused — presentation tools and therefore deserves some specific consideration. Here are some basic do's and don't's:

- Use PowerPoint slides sparingly
- Use PowerPoint slides to express something visually, or graphically, that you cannot express as well in words
- Use only as many words as absolutely necessary; the fewer the better



- Do NOT use PowerPoint slides as a substitute for your speaking notes
- Do NOT use PowerPoint slides as a substitute “take away” document for your audience

In general, keep in mind that whatever your point, you will express it more effectively if your audience is attending to you, rather than staring at the huge screen behind you. You are the most effective communicator, not your PowerPoint presentation.



BEFORE YOU SPEAK

1 PHYSICAL WARM-UP

Whatever your level of comfort and expertise, a simple warm-up will get your heart and breathing going, and lend energy to your physical presence. Running up and down a flight of stairs is great; jumping or running in place is fine, too. A minimum of five minutes is required to activate your breathing at a deeper level.

2 CHECK THE SPACE

Wherever possible try to scout the venue before the audience arrives, or even as they are arriving. Is there a podium? Do you want to use it or have it moved to the side? Is there a sound system? Don't be shy about insisting on changes that will make you more comfortable. (These are best done just after you have agreed to the speaking engagement). If possible, say a few words into the mic so you can hear your voice in the room and determine how loud or soft you have to be for optimum audibility.



3 REVIEW CENTRAL PURPOSE

As you've been doing throughout the writing, editing and rehearsal process, go over your central objective. Review the core idea that you want the audience to take away. Focus on your personal motivation behind that simple point so that your own emotional investment will drive the presentation. Remember that the audience is not there to hear "facts"; they want to hear your take on why this is important to them.

SPEAKING

1 BREATHE

As you wait to be introduced, take a few deep breaths, and keep breathing once you have begun to speak, especially if you feel yourself rushing. A deep breath is the best way to collect yourself.

2 ACTIVE PAUSES: CHECK FOR ENGAGEMENT

As you take the audience along the series of thoughts and stories that will lead to your conclusion, take time to look individuals in the eye. After an idea has been expressed and especially as you move from one major section to another, watch for nods of understanding and other acknowledgments that they are with you. In a large crowd, take more time to look at more individuals. Those pauses are their chance to participate in the theatre of the event, and they remind the listener that their engagement and comprehension is your first priority.



3 ALWAYS KEEP YOUR DESTINATION IN MIND

It can't be repeated too often: Focus on your central point and never let it out of your sight. Every sentence that you speak has meaning only because it is leading you and your audience to the desired destination. Even an entertaining digression is only there to make the ultimate arrival more enjoyable.

Let your purpose be your guide.



WHAT YOU SAY AND HOW YOU SAY IT, DEPENDS ENTIRELY ON THE "WHY".



Jack Blum's unique perspective on corporate and political communications springs from his extensive experience in creating theatre, film and television.

He has written and produced dozens of hours of film and television drama, co-creating TRADERS, one of the country's most celebrated series, and contributing to STREET LEGAL, POWER PLAY, and many more.

He began his career in political communications with the 2003 mayoral candidacy of David Miller, and Ken Dryden's 2006 Liberal Leadership campaign. Since then he has worked with many candidates and incumbents at the municipal, provincial and federal levels of government.

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