

## CHAPTER 14

### MODES OF PRESENTATION

Jacques Barzun + Henry Graff, The Modern  
Researcher (Thomson, 6<sup>th</sup> ed 2004 [1957]),  
298-301.

#### *Speaking What You Have Learned*

The researcher no doubt looks to the printed word as the means by which his findings will reach others. But latterly, thanks to talk shows, the public already used to the Sunday sermon willingly attends innumerable lectures. So a few words on giving a talk will suggest attitudes and habits that are desirable for lecturing. The two facts to ascertain before preparing any sort of talk are: "how long am I expected to speak?" and "who and how many are expected to attend?" The first determines the amount and kind of material to present; the second, the vocabulary, tone,

and degree of complexity that are appropriate. Knowing the characteristics of your audience, you can pitch your remarks at the right level. If, for example, you are addressing the League of Women Voters you can count on a degree of political sophistication that allows you to present your ideas on a public issue with confidence that it will be listened to with a ready grasp. The requirements of a freshman class at the beginning of the year or of a mixed public audience seeking diversion will naturally be different. You must supply more detail and proceed step-by-step.

An academic lecture usually lasts fifty minutes, and a practiced lecturer will find that on any subject he knows well he can deliver, without looking at the clock, fifty minutes' worth of coherent information. To prepare a lecture of any sort means carving out a subject that has unity; assembling and organizing the material; writing out a text or notes; and measuring the time of delivery. You measure by rehearsing the speech with an eye on the clock, or by writing out every word and counting. A good rate of delivery is 125 words a minute. It allows for variations of speed as well as pauses for rest or emphasis.<sup>4</sup>

All lecturers should limit themselves to a few points—six at most. These ideas, conclusions, issues, questions form the invisible structure of the performance. One may announce them near the beginning, refer to any later on to show relationships, and restate them in conclusion. This device makes up for the uncertainties and elusiveness of communication by word of mouth: the listener cannot turn back the page or request "please say that again" and cannot stop and think over a new idea or interpretation. On his side, the lecturer cannot help forging ahead. When the listener is taking notes, a gap of time and thought will quickly widen between them. Hence the lecturer repeats main points in different words; the auditor gets a second chance to follow what all parties hope is consecutive thought.

<sup>4</sup>The English advocate Marshall Hall spoke, in at least one famous case, at the rate of 158 words a minute. His opponent, Rufus Isaacs, spoke 120 words a minute (Edward Marjoribanks, *The Life of Sir Edward Marshall Hall*, London, 1929, 307-308). These are perhaps the two extremes.

The speaker must be equipped with an aid to memory. It is all too easy to forget Point 3 when its time comes or to anticipate it at the wrong place through association of ideas. On formal occasions lecturers bring a text fully written out.<sup>5</sup> Improvisation is a sign of disrespect. Among risks entailed by speaking without text, the worst is waste of time: stumbling, backtracking, and repeating tediously. With a complete text the speaker says more in the same number of minutes and says it more exactly.

On informal occasions, or on subjects frequently treated, one lectures from notes, brief or full. Full notes, such as a set of selected paragraphs or of heads and subheads when the thoughts between, are sure to come, or often in the outline style, should be clearly typed so that the lecturer seizes on the clue at a glance. Brief notes will fit on a 3×5 card that lists the four or five main heads; five or six cards accommodate a group of key words under each heading. Old-time after-dinner speakers used to jot down the hints on their starched cuffs, from which grew the expression “to speak off the cuff.” The impromptu, off-the-cuff speaker can give himself and his hearers a special pleasure, but only if he is fluent, clear, witty, and coherent. He seems like a friend addressing each listener intimately. He sounds spontaneous, unprepared, even his cuff is not in sight. Such artistry is the fruit of much preparation and long practice.

Whoever wants a grateful audience should learn to enunciate properly and pay attention to his words, not mumbling, halting, or dropping his voice at the end of every sentence.<sup>6</sup> That terminal swallow, which sometimes comes at a joke or ironic

<sup>5</sup>The sponsors of the lecture are likely to ask for the full text a week or more before the lecture, in order to give it to the press, and they often want it also for printing or excerpting afterwards.

<sup>6</sup>A study has been made of speakers' hesitation in the form of *ums*, *ers*, and *ahs*, which shows that these fill-ins depend for their frequency on what is being talked about. Scientific subjects offer fewer choices of wording than literature or art and prompt fewer hesitations. See Stanley Schachter et al., “Speech Disfluency and the Structure of Knowledge” (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, March, 1991, 362–367).

comment, is tiresome. To be avoided for the same reason are tricks of the hand, head, and limbs—fiddling with objects, rocking on your feet; or clutching your chair, lectern, or elbows.

Most important, the lecturer must always imply that he and his listeners are on the same plane of intellect, equals in their concern with the subject and in their mutual courtesy. Lecturers who intend to read their text need a warning about their prose: the essay style is not suited to oral delivery. It is difficult to follow and it sounds authoritative in the wrong way. The mind when listening cannot immediately grasp the thought as it unfolds, because the periodic structure recommended for good order and conciseness in silent reading (see Chapter 10), puts a burden on the memory when spoken. If a statement begins: “Although the conditions of . . . , even when . . . it remains in most cases undoubtedly true that . . . ,” the ideas that come between *although* and the close are quickly forgotten and the sense of something lost is unsettling. So keep sentences short and put modifiers and explanations after the main assertion.

An audience for the same reason likes an occasional signpost about the progress of the journey; for example: “At this point we have seen . . . now we go on to . . .” Or: These three reasons are perhaps enough to show that . . . , but let me assure you that a few more could be given.” The you-and-I attitude of friendly talk is appropriate for lecturing, formal and informal. And however formal, the tone should be modest. True, as lecturer you know more than “they”, but collectively they know more than you. In a question period you should readily admit errors of fact or expression that are brought to your notice. But this does not mean that you should be patient under heckling or insults. In that event the speaker with a word of apology to the civil part of the audience, retires from the place of turmoil.

### *Heading Committees and Seminars*

Besides writing and lecturing, the researcher loaded with relevant information may be asked to act in a capacity that some quite