TIPS ON TALKS

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So you've got to give a formal talk in your class—a presentation on a term project or in a laboratory or design course or a class on public speaking. That can be a scary prospect if you're not used to doing things like that. Everybody's nightmare is looking foolish in public, and a public speech seems to most people like a perfect opportunity to do just that.

It really shouldn't be that frightening. Almost every day you have the experience of talking when others are listening to you and you don't even think about it—you just do it and it works out fine. There's something about giving a SPEECH, though, that gets people into a total panic. I'm not talking about feeling a bit nervous before the talk, you understand: stage fright is perfectly normal and a little of it may even make the talk better. (If you're too relaxed you could seem bored with your topic, and speakers who sound bored lead to audiences who are bored.) If your fear goes too far over the line, however, it can cut way down on your ability to communicate.

There are a few things you can do to make your talk effective—and if you know it's going to be a good talk, your pre-talk jitters are much more likely to stay under control. Good speakers all learn these tricks sooner or later. Sooner is better than later.

Preparing

- **Speak to your intended audience at their level.** Avoid unnecessary jargon, and also avoid material you know will be obvious or trivial to them. Be persuasive—make your case.
- **Include a clear introduction** (motivate and preview your talk), **body, and summary** (conclusions, recommendations).
- **Never present a large body of information without summarizing the main points on a PowerPoint slide or a transparency.** Be aware that your audience can only absorb a small fraction of what they hear and much more of what they can see.
- **Use slides containing mostly short bulleted lists, diagrams, charts, and bulleted lists.** A picture is worth a lot more than a thousand words. If possible, use presentation software (like PowerPoint) to generate the slides. Avoid long complete sentences.
- **Keep slides uncluttered and non-cheesy** (avoid flashy colors, random builds and transitions, frequent sound effects). Contrast the writing and background—light on dark is usually best for PowerPoint, vice versa for transparencies.
- **Use a san serif font** (such as Arial) and **large type** (at least 24 pt) for text in slides. Serif fonts (such as Times New Roman, which this document uses) is better for printed documents. DON'T USE ALL CAPS—it's not that easy to read, and it looks like shouting.
- **Skip (or at least minimize) the math.** Collections of equations are usually boring and/or incomprehensible in a lecture. If you're talking about a mathematical model, focus on what it does (predicts, correlates) and how well (or poorly) it works. If anyone wants details of the math, they can ask for them later. (They won't.)
- **Print PowerPoint files as handouts, 3 slides per page.** Put supplementary lecture notes next to slides, refer to them during talk.
- **Plan a closing line.** Even if you give a great talk, ending it with "Um, I guess that's all I've got" or "I think that's the last slide" will do nothing for your cause. Say something like "That concludes my presentation—thank you for your attention" or "I'll be happy to take questions now—thanks for coming " or simply "Thank you."
• *Rehearse several times and make sure the timing is right.* Try to come in at least two minutes under your target time for the presentation. If you're running longer than that, find ways to cut it down.

**Presenting**

• *Look professional.* Dress appropriately, hands out of pockets, no slang, etc.
• *Never read word-for-word from a script.* Very few people have the skill to read directly from a prepared text without putting their audience to sleep. Use the points on the slides to guide you through the talk.
• *Make frequent eye contact with people in every part of the room.* Don't just look at your notes or the screen or the people directly in front of you.
• *Try to sound interested in your subject. If necessary, fake it.* An obvious lack of interest on the part of the speaker almost guarantees that the talk will not go well.
• *Keep track of the time.* If you see you're running short or long, try to adjust the speed of your presentation to compensate.
• *If you take questions, remember that "I'm sorry—I don't know" is a perfectly acceptable answer.* Trying to bluff your way through a tough question is usually a losing proposition.

And that's all there is to it. These practices may not make you the world's most spellbinding speaker, but they're bound to make your talk much better than it would have been without them. They also may not make speaking in public one of your favorite experiences, but they'll probably make you feel better about it than you do now and every little bit helps. Give them a try in your next presentation and see if they don't work for you.