

How to Prepare and Present a Lecture

ANYONE who has attended scientific meetings or taken postgraduate medical courses knows that physicians often give confusing lectures. It is unusual to hear a physician skillfully blend the ingredients of an effective lecture. The goal of this article will be to review the essential ingredients of an enjoyable, memorable, and meaningful lecture. Although these ingredients lend themselves poorly to rigorous scientific analysis, experience shows that these ingredients are inevitably present in all effective lectures.

Know and analyze your topic. Be clear about the conclusions that you want your audience to take home and be familiar with the facts that you will invoke to prove your conclusions. Your conclusions form the basis for communication with the audience. For instance, a presentation of many complex clinical trials without some unifying conclusions will frustrate or bore a group of practicing physicians. Even if your conclusions are tentative and controversial, they give the audience a means of organizing and discussing the topic.

Know your audience. The audience's interest, background, and expertise will shape an effective presentation. The amount of technical detail, the types of examples, and the major goals of a presentation will vary according to each audience. Effectively presenting the results of a clinical investigation before a group of subspecialty scientific investigators requires use of technical details and terms. However, these same technical terms and details may confuse an audience of students or physicians unfamiliar with the particular field of investigation. Do not present one "canned talk" to all audiences.

Define your goals to the audience. Start your presentation by stating the major tasks that you wish to fulfill, and briefly explain how you will accomplish these goals. For example, "My presentation will draw from the medical literature to describe the clinical features, pathology, and treatment of the adult respiratory distress syndrome." Generally, no more than three major goals should be undertaken in a single presentation. The greater the number of goals, the more skill and time will be needed to connect or differentiate these goals.

Win the interest of your audience. Do not begin a lecture by apologizing for the topic or any shortcomings in your presentation. Explain why the lecture is important to your audience. Draw from specific examples within their background to convince your audience to listen seriously to you. For example, briefly presenting a patient history or a common clinical problem pertinent to the lecture may generate interest from an audience of physicians.

Keep your audience's interest. Give a concise and practiced delivery. Rehearse each lecture before potential

members of your audience. If this is not practical, a tape recorder will enable a playback of at least one lecture rehearsal. There is no substitute for rehearsal, no better way to allay speaker anxiety, sense problems in structure, or appreciate time constraints. An hour of rehearsal may make the difference between a clear and a confused presentation. Be able to work from notes, slides, or a manuscript. Do not read your lecture.

Pace the lecture so as not to bore or confuse the audience. Observe the activity and facial expressions of the audience. Occasionally ask, "Am I going too quickly? Are there any questions?" These techniques will help gauge the interest and understanding generated from the presentation. Between major points, give the audience a break (ie, a bit of humor, a slide of beautiful scenery, or a discussion period). Although humor may make a lecture more enjoyable and memorable, the lecturer must beware. Mark Twain describes the humorous story as "strictly a work of art—high and delicate art." Any humor should be pertinent, practiced, and acceptable to the audience.

Know your audiovisual aids. Visit the lecture room before a presentation and become familiar with microphones, lighting, lectern height, and projection equipment. Have all slides in order and correctly oriented. Slides should aid communication. Distracting colors, tiny words, and ambiguous graphs are common shortcomings of slides. Ideally, there should be no more than ten words filling the entire surface of each slide. Any slide containing more than ten words should be carefully introduced by the lecturer. Describe each axis and population represented on a graph. Label each table and graph to explain its contribution to your presentation.

End each lecture at or before the allotted time. Generally, lectures longer than 30 minutes fatigue both the lecturer and his audience. A summary and a brief question-and-answer period at the end of a presentation may help the audience review the important conclusions.

An effective lecture requires skill, experience, and effort. The skilled lecturer will first form clear conclusions through analysis of a topic. He then will tailor the proof of these conclusions to the interests and background of his audience. The lecturer will present facts and conclusions in a practiced, specific, clear, and logical manner. He will lecture at a pace that will not lose, bore, or fatigue his audience. For it is not the topic alone, but the sympathetic and strategic communication of the topic to a particular audience that makes an enjoyable, memorable, and meaningful lecture.

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Charles Scoggins, MD, made several suggestions and Karen Fultz prepared the manuscript.

Suggested Readings

1. Barrett H: *Speaking Practically*. New York, Holt Rinehart & Winston Inc, 1982. (A basic reference.)
2. Brandt W, Beloff R, Nathan L, et al: *The Craft of Writing*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall Inc, 1969, pp 1-58. (The structure of a presentation.)
3. Ehninger D, Granbeck B, McKerrow R, et al: *Principles and Types of Speech Communication*. Glenview, Ill, Scott Foresman & Co, 1982, pp 80-100, 144-178, 237-283. (Analyzing an audience and handling visual aids.)
4. Wilson J, Arnold C: *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art*, ed 4. Boston, Allyn & Bacon, 1978, pp 244-317. (The style and delivery of a lecture.)

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