Putting Your Best Voice Forward:
Optimizing Oral Presentations

For many an engineer, the prospect of addressing an audience is viewed as nothing more than a disaster waiting to happen. In fact, the opposite is true: a presentation, if geared to the needs of your listeners, is an ideal opportunity to establish or even enhance your standing as a professional. While there is much worth saying about how to modulate your voice, forecast your main points, and coordinate what is said with what is shown, it's good to know that in almost all cases, oral presentations are front-loaded with anxieties <u>that dissipate rapidly once you begin to speak</u>.

Unlike the study of thermodynamics, there are no immutable laws that govern public speaking. However, the following suggestions should help you prepare and deliver your presentation in a manner that lends credibility to your team and its project.

Introduction

Like runners crouched in starting blocks, good speakers seek the momentum and energy of a solid start. Without that initial advantage, they never gain the traction needed to propel their presentations into high gear. Time is of the essence; be quick to state what you plan to say, in what order you plan to say it, and why your audience should care. In short, a good introduction—

- Prompts interest in the subject (asking a question can be a winning strategic move).

- Offers a brief overview (this gives your audience a sense of context and continuity).

- Forecasts the order of discussion (no more than three or four main points).

- Clarifies the purpose of the talk (the reason for your audience to stick with you).

- Cues the audience as to whether you will take questions during the talk or at the end (if either is a pre-established condition, you needn't mention it).

Body

Remember that your audience cannot go back and reread your talk; they have only one shot at understanding what you're presenting. Therefore, your material must be clear, easy to follow, and compelling. Your job is to guide the audience on a point-by-point tour that seamlessly connects your objective, methods, results, and (last but not least) the practical significance of your project.

<u>Organize</u>. One of the easiest ways to make your talk "flow" is to employ "road signs" (phrases that signal transitions between points). For example, you can use the following cues (there are many others) to alert your audience of any shift in emphasis:

- First, second, third; finally; on the other hand; let me digress for a moment; let's return to my first set of results....

<u>Summarize</u>. Periodically summarize your material, especially if you shift to a new topic. Your audience won't mind the repetition. It helps them retain what you've said.

<u>Visualize</u>. Use visual aids. Visual aids, such as Power Point slides, help reinforce the concepts the audience is hearing. However, remember that such devices are *aids*. They should support *but not dominate or monopolize* the flow and organization of your talk.

Closing Remarks

The closing generally provides a summary of your talk and restates the most important points. Your talk should conclude with a concise "take-away" message that leaves your audience with a positive and lasting impression.

Question and Answer Session

The question and answer session allows your audience time to respond. You may find that this is your favorite part of your talk. Why? Because your knowledge of the subject is now coupled with a sense that what you thought would be the "worst" is over!
Here are a few points to keep in mind.

- Respond to a variety of people.
- Keep the answers short and courteous, <u>even</u> if the question is antagonistic.
- If you don't know the answer, admit it.
- End the session at an appropriate time and in a pleasant manner.

Stand and Deliver

- Make eye contact. Why should listeners look at you if you don't look at them?
- Speak as if you are talking to friends whose intelligence you respect.
- Slow down. If you audience can't understand you, you've lost them.
- Pump up the volume. Your listeners in the back can't hear what you're saying.
- Dress appropriately. A baseball cap and sandals damage your credibility.
- Use language and terminology appropriate to your audience.
- Once you've established your seriousness, a little humor goes a long way.
- Smile! Nobody likes a grouch.
- Relax. People want you to succeed.

Power Point Presentation Tips

- Begin with a slide that engages your audience.
- Slides should progress from general to more specific topics.
- White space is your friend; a strong contrast (for example, a dark blue background with white text) improves audience comprehension.
- Go easy on combining graphs and images and text boxes into one slide; too much visual material can overwhelm your audience.
- Transmit your enthusiasm to the audience, not to the slides.