Public speaking : protect and survive

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1 Introduction

Public speaking is more than just a question of getting through your material in the allotted time. You have to get it into the heads of the audience as well. More than that you would like to impress them enough that they go away and bother to retain what you said and possibly even look up your paper. In short you have to engage with them. Here are a few guidelines to help you do that. Some of them may seem rather cynical. I think this merely indicates that talks are a) a very poor way of conveying information b) mainly 'political', in a sense that will become clear as we go along. This is wisdom gained over many years of giving and attending talks. Of course these rules are not always easy to apply as no doubt you will realise if you have attended my own talks, but it should give you some idea of what to aim for. You may choose to ignore it and learn the hard way instead.

2 Preparation beforehand

Remember your audience is waiting to be impressed and entertained (but is for the most part entirely passive). The best way to impress them is to be prepared and for them to see that. Organize your talk properly and know it back to front. You should address it to (or slightly below) your audience, so the first thing you have to do before preparing is to find out who will be in your audience. It is difficult to underestimate the audience - sadly the accepted statistic is that the average audience member spends less than 20% of the time actually listening fully to what you are saying. Because of this engaging with an audience is a much more difficult prospect than engaging with a single listener. It is more like talking to a bored child with attention deficit disorder. Help them to concentrate by having plenty of pointers. Put in mini summaries so that people can catch up if they have tuned out. Keep telling them what you are doing and why. If there are two ways to explain things do so. Put in plenty of pictures.

The talk should roughly be organized as follows

1. The beginning - Say WHAT you are going to do and WHY it is interesting. Then briefly summarize.

2. The middle - build your arguments logically and piece by piece - beginning with what you think the audience knows. NEVER MISS STEPS IN THE LOGIC. Every time you do this you lose 50% of the audience. Try to have one step per transparency.
3. The end - Summarize WHAT you have done. COMPARE to previous work. Say WHY it is better. Say what remains to be done in the future.

Once your talk is prepared and you are happy it is in this format your preparation is about 50% completed. You now need to do the following

Read again through and around the subject as much as you can without being physically sick.

Think of questions that might come up and think of possible answers, of which more later.

Above all, OWN YOUR ARGUMENTS. You are going to convince an audience, many of whom have differing opinions that your model, theory, whatever, is better than theirs. This is only possible if you believe them yourself. (This is in fact the whole point of a PhD - you might like to discuss this with your supervisor at some point.)

The evening before, go through the talk outloud, even if you feel stupid, and SEVERAL TIMES. This will make you much more confident on the day and also help you to organize your time during the talk.

3 On the day

Eat a good breakfast

If you have ever been nervous talking to your supervisor, you will be doubly nervous now. This feeling never goes away but you can learn how to control it and use it. Many symptoms of nervousness (shaking, sweating etc) are to do with energy loss. To combat this, eat something energy boosting but light 10-15 minutes before the talk (e.g. chocolate). Have something heavy with a slower energy release for afterwards.

Go over your transparencies quickly to remind you of what's on them.

4 During the talk

First let's talk a bit more about the audience. Their expertise will of course vary and you should make sure you know what type of audience you are addressing before you prepare the talk. Despite this, the social composition of an audience is more or less invariant. Broadly speaking, an average audience consists of the following;

- 50% are people who are just hanging around for the whole session and may be reading something else but pretending to listen to you by lifting their eyes every so often.

- 30% are people who drifted in on the off chance that your talk may have been of relevance. Once they arrive they realise it is not and would like to go but are trapped by the guy sitting on the end of the row. They will spend the rest of the talk resenting you for wasting theiry time.

- 10% are people who are waiting for the talk after yours and got the time wrong - they'll wait anyhow though just to be polite, but probably think about something else or just gaze at the ceiling.

- 5% are people who are genuinely interested! That's the good news. The bad news is that they have a better model of their own and are here to make sure your's is rubbish and to shoot it down if they get the chance. They will ask questions like "Why should we believe this model when the (insert-name)-model is so much better". They may also adopt an air of general disdain and boredom in order to convince the rest of the audience that they should ignore what you are saying.

- 5% are people who actually like your model and are interested in what you have to say. This includes your supervisor - in an audience of 20 or less this group will probably only be him/her.

Example: a typical seminar audience in the UK would be about 16 people. Of these, 7 will be there because they go every week to avoid work, 4 came along because they misunderstood your title, 2 are there because they were drafted to make up the numbers, 1 is there because he mistook you for a good friend of his who actually died a few years ago (when you deny this he'll probably ask if you're related), 1 is there because he's an expert and feels obliged, 1 is actually interested (possibly the guy that invited you), and 1 is a mystery guy that no-one knows who turns up every week and falls asleep right in front of you before you even start to speak. Sad but true.

Corollary: you're lucky if even 5% of the audience are willing to put much effort into understanding what you have to say. Not only that but they will have probably read your paper anyway. So, for the most part these are NOT the people you are addressing. Your job is to entertain and impress the 90% of the audience that is entirely neutral, and to win over the 5% who are actually against you. To do this you have to convince them that you believe what you are saying .

Most of this (i.e. convincing the 90% neutrals) can be done entirely with body language and is independent of what you have to say. (Of course the best way to adopt the air of someone who believes what they are saying is to ACTUALLY believe what you are saying - i.e. own your argument, again. If you do not the chances are you will be found out.) Remember most of the 90% will not be experts and will not be able to judge what you are saying. Their impression of the strength of your argument will be based almost entirely on your apparent convinction and whether you can tackle questions. So ...

- Stand straight, head up

- Face the audience and talk TO THEM

- NEVER just read off the transparencies
- Discuss everything on the transparencies - don't flick quickly over transparencies as the audience won't take anything in and may even become hysterical. Also don't do that covering-over-half-the-transparency-and-then-revealing-it-later thing. I think someone thought this was a good idea in the seventies. Everyone hates that.
- Look relaxed and confident
- Project your voice to the back of the room
- Look as if you are enjoying yourself and are impressed with the cut and thrust and general cleverness of your arguments and results - if you don't look impressed the audience won't be.
- Do not talk when you are looking away from the audience. This is especially difficult if you are using a blackboard so transparencies are better.
- Pause between transparencies and after having made major points.
- If you find yourself gabbling - take a deep breath, count to 5. Don't "race for the end" - otherwise before you know it you'll find yourself having finished and regretting having lost everyone.
- TAKE CONTROL of the talk. Remember you are leading it. If someone asks lots of questions it is perfectly alright to ask them to wait until later when you will address it. Note that a tactic of the hostile 5% may be to delay you so you run out of time and then close in for the kill at final questions when you are disoriented and disappointed at not having got all your stuff in.
- If someone disagrees with you, firmly and politely say why you think they are wrong. If you look anxious or raise your voice, they win the point. If you disagree with them take a second to compose a good argument and calmly explain it.
- NEVER get personal with a questioner. It looks desparate and again you lose the point. For example if someone you know to be an expert ask you an elementary question do not say "Well, I thought you'd know that".
- If someone is being really stupid or irrelevant then say "as I said before" or "that's an interesting point but probably outside the scope of this work" or "it doesn't really make much difference to the end result". Note that you can use these tactics even if it DOES make a difference but you hadn't realised it before.
- If someone asks a tough question and you have no idea what they are on about, NEVER say nothing, but don't blather either. Answer a question which you think might be similar to what they were asking. You can even begin "I'm not sure I fully understand your question, but if you mean ... ". Waffle on for a few minutes and finish by saying "Does that answers your question?", and look them straight in the eye. Unless they are extremely confident they will say yes. Half the time they won't even know what they were trying to ask anyway and will be relieved to be let off the hook.

5 In the event of emergency

Here are some common emergencies and suggested procedures to adopt.

1. *Someone tells you that this has all been done by some Latvian in 1974*: Tell them that yes you are aware of that work, but your work adds a new twist and in any case you don't agree with their interpretation or some such nonsense. Even if it's not true the chances are they haven't read it anyway but have just heard about it. If it is true (or, even worse, if they happen to be the Latvian in question) and they disagree then they may object. But you object back and no-one else is any the wiser. If he or she still objects proceed to step 2. The chances are you'll never see him again and this guy goes back to Latvia and dies of cholera or something.

2. *Someone really convinces you that this is all wrong*: Tell them that you're not sure you agree but would like to talk about it after - to be used CAREFULLY as it's a very obvious avoidance tactic and looks weak. Try to paraphrase this as much as possible. (Although some of the audience may become mirthful when they see through it and realize that you are in trouble.) You can say something like - "I'm not sure I can answer that properly now, but I'll try to answer it afterwards".

3. *Some bigwig, let's call him Professor X (possibly a member of the hostile 5%), laughs openly or makes a sarcastic remark that disparages your work and indeed your very existence*: This could be curtains but the best tactic here is simply politely to explain why you think they are wrong. Remember this is a different situation from speaking in private where you might be tempted to laugh along with them in order to save face. If you do that here you look like a fool. You should very publicly and seriously acknowledge that they disagree, and tell them (politely) that you think this is because they failed to understand your argument. It's even better if you can point out precisely where they have gone wrong as then they run the risk of looking stupid. To avoid this they will do some serious backpeddling and will vigorously agree with everything you say from then on. Also remember this is not the worst outcome. The worst outcome is for no one to ask or say anything. This is actually the second worst, in which your questioner is trying to make your talk out to be unworthy of serious attention, but you yourself to be mildly amusing. Don't let them get away with it.

4. *General attack!:* If you do not fend off professor X's question properly, you may run into the following phenomenon. Prof X's comment encourages a group of his underlings. Suitably emboldened and sensing that you are wounded they fall over themselves to rubbish your talk in order to curry favour with Prof X. You come under general attack. The best thing to do in this sort of situation is to treat them all as one person and speak to them as you did to Prof X. Explain the thrust of your argument from the beginning. Make it obvious how patient you are being by talking to them VERY SLOWLY and carefully as you would to a group of slightly errant but simple children. Emphasize your points. Say things like "As

I have stressed a few times" "Let me say this again because perhaps you didn't understand that" and so on. Hopefully the rest of the audience will pick up on the fact that you are now finding this line of questioning a bit trivial and tiresome.

5. *You run out of time*: This shouldn't happen if you organize yourself properly and field questions efficiently. You can ask the organizer for a few more minutes. If you really run out then skip to the last transparency and try to give the audience the gist of what you were going to say.

6. *You yourself become convinced that your talk is all wrong half way through*: ignore this feeling and press on regardless. When looked at in the cold light of day the chances are this is simply a misgiving anyway and will turn out to be groundless.