

Speaking in Public

Presenting your message effectively

As campaigners we often get asked to put across our message at public meetings, debates or conferences. Doing it badly can discredit you and your arguments. Doing it well can bring new people into your campaign and re-energise the old guard. Fortunately, with the right preparation and a few handy tips, speaking in public can be a very positive experience!

In this briefing we're going to look at considering your audience, planning your content, building your confidence and speaking with clarity. Three of these steps happen before the speaking engagement even begins - the good news is that most of the work you can do to ensure you speak well can be done in advance.

Preparing your talk

As with many planning exercises the *Five Ws* can be useful to us. They are: Why, Who, Where, When, and What.

Ask yourself

Why are you agreeing to do this talk? **Who** will you be speaking to **Where** will it take place the venue and the format of the event **When** is the talk scheduled to happen the actual day, and it's place within the event **What** are you going to say

The Five Ws

1) *Why are you agreeing to do this talk?*

We often feel we have to jump at every opportunity to spread the word and make the world a better place. so the first question you should ask is “why give the talk?”. You're under no obligation to say “yes”.

Make sure you're clear on the outcomes you're looking for. Are you raising awareness or motivating people to take a specific action? Is talking to this group likely to bring you the outcome you want? There's no point, for example, agreeing to talk to a hostile audience unless your oratorical skills are so great that you can change their hearts and minds simply by giving a 20 minute presentation. Similarly there may be little point in preaching to the converted who have already taken action. Say “no” and preserve your energy for the events where you can make a real difference.

2) *Where will you be speaking?*

The location of the presentation may affect your speaking style, and may impose specific technical demands on you. Big venues may mean that you have to use a microphone, for example. If you've never used one before you want to avoid embarrassing incidents such as forgetting to turn it on or saying something unprofessional whilst thinking it's off!

Check out your venue beforehand if possible and familiarise yourself with the technology and layout. Standing on a stage with lights in your eyes, unable to see your audience, is a very different experience to talking to 15 people in the local community centre, and you need to be able to deal with both, and everything in between! If you can't visit the venue in advance, arrange to arrive early on the day of the presentation. You also need to check you have all the equipment you need, and that it works. Test electronic equipment first. Make sure there's chalk for blackboards, pen for whiteboards (and that they work) etc.

3) *When are you speaking?*

This is more than making sure you show up at the right time on the right day. You need to know whether you're the only speaker, and if not whether you're speaking first or last, or in between. If you can, try to get the last word so your message is the last thing the audience hears. Also find out if there will be a break or a question and answer session.

Considering your audience

4) *Who will you be speaking to?*

You will need to prepare a different presentation depending on who is in your audience, so do as much research as possible to find out who's likely to be there. An audience of churchgoers will have different needs and expectations to a primary school assembly, so make sure you think about it and do your best to meet those needs with appropriate stories, examples, use of language and visual aids.

Planning your content

5) *What are you going to say?*

Having done all your research, you now need to ask yourself what it is that you are going to say – what's the content of your talk?? How will you connect to your audience and make the presentation memorable and relevant to them?

It's worth knowing that your audience forgets most of what they hear very quickly. Whoever you're communicating with will forget 25% of what you say within 24 hours, 50% of it within 48 hours and a whopping 80% of what you say within 4 days.

So how do you make your talk the one they don't forget?? See the box on the right for some ideas.

Making your talk memorable

*In order to maximise your effect, *pick just a few simple key messages* and stick to them. Don't get sidetracked. There are many things you might *want* your audience to know about the state of the world, but what do they *need* to know to give you your desired outcome? Making one point well and illustrating it clearly and relevantly is far more memorable than rushing through eight or ten points and leaving your audience overwhelmed

**Reinforce your key points.* It's better to repeat 3 or 4 points using a variety of interesting anecdotes and relevant facts than to make too many points

**Illustrate your talk* with visual aids, stories, humour or appropriate facts. Remember the old saying that a picture paints a thousand words

* *Be relevant.* For example, if you're talking to a mothers' group illustrate your talk with examples of how climate change threatens their children's future, or how water privatisation leads to infant deaths in the third world

**Interact with your audience* – the more involved people are in their own learning, the more they remember. Just listening to a talk doesn't help them to absorb as much as an interactive exercise. Can you build a short quiz into your presentation? Or maybe you can have the audience share ideas or experiences with those sat next to them and then feedback a few from the group. As long as it's kept relevant interaction will help engage your audience and help them retain more of your key messages

**Use the power of 3!* Group phrases and adjectives in threes – they sound good and are easy to remember –e.g: “GM crops are unpredictable, unpopular and unnecessary”. A little bit of alliteration or assonance (using words that start with the same letter) helps

What not to say

In general people (especially adults) don't like it if we challenge their view of themselves. Usually they get defensive. So when you're speaking to a group don't challenge the person, challenge their ideas or behaviour. It's a fine distinction, but one worth thinking about. But what does that mean in practise? In terms of the language you use, it can be as simple as saying "Our actions are the cause of the problem" instead of "We are the cause of the problem". Get off the moral high ground and join the group – "Our actions" sounds better than "Your actions" for example. If you're responding to a question or comment from the audience you might say "I disagree with what you're saying" rather than "I disagree with you".

Get emotional

Don't just rely on cold facts or statistics. Appeal to people's emotions. People are much more likely to take action because they 'feel' strongly about a situation than because they 'think' strongly. You could start by saying how a situation makes you feel, and sharing your own motivation, but don't let the talk become about you! Human interest stories can work wonders.

How long is too long?

How long should you speak for? How long does a speaker keep you engaged before you start fidgeting? Even if you're offered longer don't be afraid to keep your talk to under half an hour. If you have extra time, fill it with interaction – quizzes, discussion or question and answers.

Building your Confidence

Nervousness is a big problem with public speaking. The first step to overcoming your nerves is to realise that it's perfectly natural, and everyone gets nervous sometimes. Next, look at some of the following ideas, and try out the ones that work for you:

Mental rehearsal

Mental rehearsal's just a posh way of saying running through the talk in your mind. It's not quite the same as practicing for real, but it comes a close second best. In your mind run through the presentation. See and hear yourself delivering your talk well. See yourself standing confidently, speaking confidently, and motivating the audience to act. Hear yourself deal with a tricky question with ease. Regular mental rehearsal can make a huge difference to your confidence levels!

Breathing

You know that when you're tense or nervous you tend to breath faster and more shallowly. Counter the nerves by breathing deeply, right to the bottom of your lungs. Allow your breathing to soften, deepen and become regular, and let the rhythm calm you. If you find your nerves creeping back during your talk, pause and take two or three calming breaths. Some people like to cup their palm on their belly, just below their navel, whilst they breath. Imagine the breath gently pushing your stomach out and filling your cupped palm – now you're breathing deeply enough!

Speaking from the heart

It can help to remember that you're entitled to stand up and speak on this issue. You don't have to be a government scientist, and eminent historian, or a paid official to hold a valid opinion. You are a sentient and caring member of the human race. So you might not have all the facts? So what – speak with passion and intelligence and your audience will soon relate to you.

Use visual aids

If you have visual aids to support your presentation you don't need notes. Use your visual aids as prompts - a quick glance at your next slide can remind you what you were going to say. But remember not to read from the slides word for word!

Practice makes perfect

There's no substitute for building confidence quite like practice. Once you've decided what to key points to make, and you've picked appropriate examples and stories to illustrate the talk, write it out in at least note form and practice. Rope in a few friends because they will be able to spot little habits that you, um, won't, um, notice that you even have. You can also test out any jokes you are thinking of telling to double check they're genuinely funny. If not edit them out of your talk. When you feel you are getting the hang of it, abandon any notes you have and try it without. Speaking without notes is the ideal – you will seem more confident and believable. An audience can usually tell when you're reading from a script, or saying something word for word from memory.

Speaking with Clarity

There are lots of techniques to help you get your message across clearly:

Structure your talk

If your talk follows a logical flow, the audience will find it easier to understand. One tried and tested theory says that you should split your talk into 3 parts. In the first part tell the audience what you are planning to tell them. Then in the main part, tell them it. Then you summarise telling them what you have just told them!

“Tonight I'm going to talk to you about the 3 things you can do to make the world a more just place for the poor..... Each and every one of us can.....and.....and..... Thanks for listening ladies and gentlemen. Now I want each and every one of you to go home and.....and.....and.....tonight. Don;t wait until tomorrow, do it now!”

Be heard

Check that your voice is carrying to the back of the room – before you start ask someone to go to the back and see if they can hear you. It's worth checking again at the start of your talk – all of those people waiting to hear you speak absorb quite a lot of sound! If you know you have a quiet voice, don't be afraid to ask for a microphone, even if other speakers haven't used one.

If you're organising the talk yourself, try and use a venue that has a hearing induction loop for those with hearing impairments

Visual aids

Don't just rely on your voice – reinforce your messages with visual

Using Visual Aids

Ask if everyone can see and read any writing. If not do something about it!

Talk to your group not to the paper, OHP or laptop! It's better to pause whilst you turn over a page or go on to the next slide rather than lose what you're saying in the process.

Don't use green or red together – some people are red/green colour blind and have trouble distinguishing one colour from the other.

Use lower case letters – the eye finds it easier to read them from a distance.

Use headings or captions on your visual aids. Headings help us build mental associations and remember and 'file' our memories appropriately.

aids. Visual aids are a great way of making a talk more interesting

Body language and tone of voice

Think about your body language and tone of voice. Psychologists tell us that:

- The **words** you use account for just **7%** of what people believe (what you say: the *verbal* information)
- **38%** of what people believe is down to your **tone of voice** (the way you sound: the *vocal* information)
- But the majority of what people believe - **55%** - is down to **body language!** (the way you look while you're talking: the *visual* information)

So if you want people to believe your presentation you need to think about how you look and sound, as well as what you say – all the more reason to practice in front of a few friends!! Make eye contact with your audience, try to look like you are relaxed and enjoying yourself even if you're not. Uncross your arms, don't grip the lectern until your knuckles go white. Smile!

Be aware of overdoing the body language. Do you wave your arms around so much that it distracts from what you're saying??

Be especially aware of your tone of voice when answering questions. Don't sound defensive or hurt if someone disagrees with you, or questions your viewpoint, for example

Clear Language

Use simple and understandable language. Avoid using jargon and acronyms. When you do use either, make sure you explain it at least the first time you use it. If a member of the audience uses jargon, ask them to explain it for the benefit of everyone else. Also think about the language that is appropriate and clear to the group you're speaking to. A youth group might relate to very different language to the Women's Institute.

Pace yourself

The pace at which you speak is important. In general, especially if you're nervous, you'll speak too fast. Take regular pauses (use them to do some calming breathing) and let your information sink in. If you're paying attention to your audience you'll soon know if you're going too slowly, or have been speaking too long (they'll get restless!)

Dealing with Difficult Situations

Please don't assume your audience is the enemy. Most of them will respect you simply for having the courage to get up and speak. And if you've come across as intelligent, passionate but welcoming, you will get very few problems.

As campaigners there's a real danger we sound aloof and can come across as on our high horses. Avoid that and you'll be fine.

Answering awkward questions

Once in a while you'll get a question that's more challenging, either because you don't know the answer or because it critiques your viewpoint. Here's what you can do:

- Acknowledge the question – it shows the questioner that you respect them and are open to dialogue - “that's a good question...”, “thanks for bringing that up...”

- Throw questions back to the questioner, or others around you. Don't assume that you personally have to have an answer for everything: "That's a really good question – I'd be interested to hear what you think."
- Pause and think – you can't be expected to have a perfectly formed answer immediately. You could say "can I think about that for a second..." or "Let's take another question whilst I think about that one, if that's OK" but make sure you go back and deal with it later!
- You're allowed to politely decline to answer irrelevant questions
- Be honest if you can't answer the question that's asked. Offer to find out the answer at another time and get back to them, or signpost other sources of information, such as websites and briefings, that could answer the question for them. Whatever you do, don't waffle or pretend you know the answer when you don't – you could discredit the entire campaign in the eyes of the questioner.
- Use examples in your response to ground it in reality and make it more credible

Dealing with Timewasters

Don't waste time with timewasters – target your efforts to where you can actually make change. As campaigners we want to bring others over to our point of view. But we can't achieve that in one go, and many of our actions and encounters are strategically targeted at specific groups. So stay focused and ask yourself "Is this interaction the most strategic use of my time?". Agree to disagree. Thank the person for expressing their opinion and ensure them that you respect their right to hold it. Be polite and firm and then move on.

Top Tips:

Know what you want to achieve! Prepare a talk relevant to your audience and your aims Pick a few key points and say them calmly and clearly Support your talk with visual aids and stories Remember your body language – relax, smile and enjoy yourself. If you're having fun, your audience are much more likely to enjoy the presentation!

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