

How to Engage Your Audience and Keep Them with You

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I. Design an effective introduction.

- A. **Engage** the audience—get them interested, give them a reason to listen. How?
- Describe a scene or a character.
 - Tell a story.
 - Share a personal experience.
 - Relate to a recent event.
 - Piggyback on a previous speaker's remark or theme.
 - Point out something important about the audience or the current setting.
 - Show a compelling visual image.
 - Ask a provocative question.
 - State a fact that is troubling, amusing, or remarkable.
 - Spell out what's at stake for your listeners.
 - Offer a humorous observation or anecdote.
 - Explain your own interest in the topic.
 - Tell listeners what the topic has to do with them.
- B. **Focus** the presentation—tell listeners what it's about. State the presentation's goal or your thesis or research question. Tell listeners what they'll learn.
- C. **Preview** what's to follow—your points, your approach, or the type of content.

II. Gear your treatment of content to your listeners' knowledge, experience, and interests.

- A. **Define unfamiliar terms.**
- B. **Use concrete, specific examples** to illustrate points. Tell stories.
- C. **Make statistics meaningful:** Use graphics to help clarify numerical data. Round off big numbers. Interpret stats, translate them into human terms. Make comparisons.
- D. **Use analogies** to relate the unknown to the known. (“It's kind of like...”)
- E. **Build audience involvement** by making your subject immediate, personal, and local.
1. Connect to the here-and-now.
 2. Refer to your listeners' experience. Mention your own experience. Personalize the subject when that's appropriate.
 3. Highlight the local angle—a person, a place, an event. Bring it home.

III. Help your listeners find their way through your presentation.

A. *Use previews and summaries.*

1. Previews tell listeners what's coming next or how you're going to develop a point. For instance, in a discussion of why discrepancies exist between cars' EPA gas mileage ratings and actual gas mileage, you might say "First I'm going to explain how the EPA arrives at its numbers. Then I'll explain how the Consumers Union conducts its tests."
2. Summaries remind listeners of what's important in what was just covered. A summary is especially useful in reframing or refocusing the discussion after a string of supporting details or after any fairly lengthy discussion of a point.

B. *Use signposts and transitions.*

1. Signposts are words or phrases such as "In the first place...", "The second issue is...", "The key argument is...", etc. They tell the audience where they are in the presentation and flag what's important to note or remember.
2. Transitions make sure no one gets left behind when you move from one point to the next. They show how pieces of content relate to one another and to your thesis; they tie things together and improve "flow." Transitions in oral presentations often must be more obvious than those used in writing. They tell listeners not only that you're moving on but also where you're going next. Changes in body position, gestures, and voice can help listeners recognize a transition.

IV. Use language and verbal devices that are clear to the ear.

A. *Avoid vague pronoun references.* These are bad in writing but terrible in speech. Listeners don't have the option of looking back over the text to figure them out.

B. Similarly, *avoid words like "respectively"* (as in "John, Ashley, and Tamika represented the Departments of Economics, Biology, and English, respectively.") *and "the former...the latter"* (as in "You can purchase beef that is either dry-aged or wet-aged. Professional chefs know that, for the best steaks, you want the latter.").

Like pronouns, both of these constructions require the audience to remember certain details in order to understand a later reference to them. The problem is that listeners may not have paid close enough attention to the earlier details; they didn't realize they'd be "tested" on them later. Whenever you're tempted to use this type of verbal device, ask yourself, "If I had only my ear to depend on and heard it only once, would I get it?"

V. Design an effective conclusion.

- A. ***Summarize and refocus.*** Recap the main points or arguments you've covered. Reiterate your purpose, thesis, or research question. Reinforce what's important for the audience to take away from your presentation.

- B. ***Close.*** Create closure, a sense of finality. Here you can use many of the same kinds of devices suggested for openings. You can even return to exactly the same anecdote, quotation, or remark you used at the beginning—and give it a twist. Other approaches are to lay down a challenge, look to the future, or simply to firmly restate your basic conclusion or recommendation. Avoid introducing new evidence or opening a new line of argument.