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Six Mistakes to Avoid in Public Speaking, So Your Presentation Sparkles

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Introduction

Your boss asks you to present at the next department meeting.

You have to give an update about your project to senior management.

Your best friend asks you to give the toast at his wedding.

Your community organization honors you with the Member of the Year Award and asks you to say a few words at the ceremony.

You're involved in your child's school and you've been asked to speak about a school fundraiser at the next Parent Teacher Association meeting.

You're taking a class in college or graduate school and your professor requires an oral report as part of your assignment.

These and many others are common situations where you need to use public speaking. Whether you speak to a small or large audience in a corporate, academic or community setting, there are guidelines to follow and mistakes to avoid, in order to ensure that your presentation is well-prepared, effective and engaging.

If you're new to public speaking, you might be anxious or concerned about knowing what to say or how to say it. You're worried that the audience won't listen to you or won't care about what you have to say. This special report will outline the six major mistakes that you should avoid in public speaking.

If you're an experienced presenter, this special report will serve as a checklist to consult when preparing and a reminder of what not to do.

The good news is that public speaking is a skill, which like any other skill, can be learned and practiced. Avoiding these six common mistakes will help you on your way to being a more polished and professional presenter!

Mistake #1: Ignoring the Audience's Needs

If you ignore your audience's needs, you lose the opportunity to make a connection to them and engage them in your message. Yet I've seen many presenters, including experienced ones, ignore the audience and speak as if they're talking to themselves.

Why Should The Audience Care About What You Have to Say?

You're not ready to speak to an audience unless you can answer this question.

The people in your audience are bombarded with information from many sources and they have to filter it in order to stay afloat. They can only retain a small part of what you're saying and they need to find which part is most relevant to them. So, in order to connect to them, you have to make it clear why what you have to say is important to them. How will make their lives better or easier or more fun or more informed? State this reason outright; for example, in a presentation about transitions, you might say, "If you understand the stages of reaction to change, you will be better able to understand what your employees will go through when the merger is announced next month."

Know Their Background

It's important for you to know as much about your audience as possible, so you can prepare and deliver material that will be relevant, engaging and useful. Even if the audience is made up of people you know personally or work with on a daily basis, take a step back and rethink the audience in the context of this presentation. Some questions to think about:

- Are they experts in the field you're talking about or novices?
- Will everyone understand the industry jargon that you're using? For example, if you mention "AEs" in a presentation, salespeople may interpret it as Account Executives, while those in the pharmaceutical industry may interpret it as Adverse Events (which are adverse or negative side-effects from medication). You have to speak in a language that everyone can understand easily and be careful not to talk down to them or over their heads.
- Are you trying to win over a hostile audience? Are you talking to an audience that is already passionate about the topic? Are they bored by the topic? If you're a tax accountant speaking to small business owners about the tedious details of the state tax code, you might have to work harder to keep their interest than if you were talking to other accountants. Similarly, if you're the speaker standing between the audience and lunch, there is a greater expectation that you will end on time (or better yet, end early).
- Does this audience want to see the graphs? Do they want the big picture or the details? Are they focused on defining the problem or hearing a solution?

What Else?

Sometimes, you won't know anything about your audience and you'll have to do some research. Do an internet search for the company or individuals and browse their websites or websites related to their industry to discover the hot topics or industry concerns. You also can get feedback from colleagues who know members of your audience.

What if you gather information about your audience, only to find out that they're a mix of different styles, backgrounds and interest levels? That situation is a challenge. You should choose the "relevant" subsection of the audience to focus on - for example, the decision makers, or the largest identifiable group in the audience. However, be careful not to ignore everyone else. No one likes to be ignored and you never know what roles the other people in the room might fill in the future.

Mistake #2: Not Making Eye Contact

Eye contact demonstrates your willingness to connect to the audience on a personal level. It also shows that you are confident and proves that the information resides in your head, not your notes or the slides. When you present, you are talking to individuals, not an impersonal mass of people. You want each person to experience the communication one-on-one.

Maintain eye contact with each person for about 5 seconds, which is about the time it takes to complete a thought. Then move on to another person. Yes, 5 seconds will feel like a long time at first! If someone is uncomfortable with the eye contact, they can choose to look away.

If you are nervous about making eye contact, you can try this technique as a starting point: look right above their eyes, at their eyebrows. It will look like you're making regular eye contact and will help you get more comfortable until you can look them straight in the eye.

Eye Contact Tips

- Avoid "tennis eyes" - moving from one side of the room to the other in a repetitive pattern, as if you were watching a tennis match or reading from dual teleprompters.
- Avoid scanning the room quickly, trying to look at everyone at the same time.
- Aim for eye contact with all sections of the audience on a random basis - no one should be able to predict where you will look next.
- Stand where you can make eye contact with all parts of the room - don't ignore any section or person.

Mistake #3: Missing the Point

How many times have you sat through a presentation, only to walk out wondering "what was the point of that?!" Whether it's a presentation that lasts one minute or one hour, if the audience doesn't know what the point was, then the presentation was not successful.

Have a Message

What is the one thing that you want your audience to walk away with from your presentation? That one thing is your message, also known as your theme, your purpose and your point. Realistically, that's all the audience can digest and remember from a presentation, especially considering the sheer amount of data and information that is thrown at them on a daily basis from all sources.

You should be able to describe your message in one sentence. It could contain a call to action such as "company x has solid financials, a good product and a sound business plan, so we should invest in it." Or it could be informative such as "you can overcome your fear of public speaking." If you can't say it in one sentence, then you haven't focused enough yet.

Sometimes it's not clear to you what your message is. If so, set aside extra time to prepare. Look through your material and keep organizing and reorganizing it until you see one clear theme or message emerge. You're not ready to deliver your presentation until you have identified it - if it's not clear to you what the message is, it won't be clear to your audience.

Make Your Message Clear to the Audience

Once you have identified your message, make it clear to the audience. State what your message is in your introduction to help your audience focus on it as you go through the body of your presentation. And repeat your message in your conclusion so it's the last thing they hear, which will help them remember it.

If something doesn't relate to your message, cut it out. When you are preparing your presentation, look at every example, detail and story you'd like to include and be ruthless about cutting out what doesn't relate to your message. You want to make it easy for your audience to focus rather than forcing them to sift through all the extra information to uncover your message. If you have extra details, keep them in your notes so you can use them if someone asks you a question. You can also include them in your handouts (like an appendix in a book), but don't clutter your presentation (or worse, your slides) with them.

Mistake #4: Letting Fear Overpower You

If you are afraid of speaking in public, you're not alone. In fact, Americans rate public speaking as their number one fear - even ahead of death (hence the old joke that you would rather be in the coffin than giving the eulogy)! Whether it's a mind-numbing, knee-knocking, stomach-churning fear, or a milder, less invasive, I'd-rather-not-be-doing-this fear, it can get in the way of your professional success and your personal growth.

Identify Your Fears

In my presentation skills classes, I ask participants to identify their public speaking fears. Responses include what you might expect - for example, "I'm afraid my mind will go blank" and "I'm afraid I'll lose my place." Next, I ask the crucial question, "And then what will happen?"

The responses always amaze me. When we dig deeply into that fear, what began as "I'm afraid my mind will go blank" or "I'm afraid I'll lose my place" ends up as "and then I'll look stupid in front of my boss, and then I'll get fired, and then I'll lose my house, and then my spouse will leave me, and then the dog will run away."

No wonder you don't want to give that presentation - you fear that your entire life is riding on it!

How likely is it that all those terrible things will happen, as a result of this one presentation? Very unlikely! Yet the fact that someone is worrying about them shows how powerful fear can be and how debilitating. Once you identify it, however, you can subject it to logic (does this fear really make sense?) and probability (what are the odds these awful things will happen?) and start to weaken its power over you.

Identify Your "Joy-Sucker"

Think about what's going through your head right at that moment when you're getting ready to open your mouth. Take a moment, close your eyes and really listen for that voice - what is it saying?

When I ask clients to share what that voice in their head is telling them right before they speak, they invariably come out with a whiny, annoying voice spewing negatives like "you're going to make a fool of yourself" or "who do you think you are?"

That voice goes by many names. Creativity expert Julia Cameron calls it "The Censor." I call it the "Joy-Sucker" because it sucks the joy out of your work and your life. The Joy-Sucker undermines your confidence and makes you less able to convey your knowledge and experience to your audience. In its worst manifestations, it may even cause you to forget your own name!

The Joy-Sucker may come from old beliefs about ourselves or perhaps a comment made by an unhelpful friend, teacher or ex.

Create a Mantra

Instead of allowing the Joy-Sucker to sap your confidence, I recommend replacing it with a positive affirmation or Mantra. Mantra is a term that is used in meditation and yoga – it comes from the Sanskrit words for "instrument of thought" and means a word or phrase that you repeat to yourself to focus your mind and energy.

Your mantra should be personally meaningful to you and should be a phrase that you can believe. You can use a song title (Aretha Franklin's "RESPECT" comes to mind), a line from a poem or anything that makes you feel powerful and confident. "You go, girl" is my personal favorite (accompanied by a mental fist in the air).

Once you have created a mantra, try it out in real-life situations. When you're getting ready to speak, listen for the Joy-Sucker and replace it with your mantra.

Remember that the Joy-Sucker has had years of practice, so it's okay to try several mantras before you find one that is powerful enough to drown it out.

You'll know the mantra is working when you feel your anxiety decreasing and your confidence increasing (a little bit at a time). As you build your confidence, you'll be able to tap into your knowledge and experience related to the topic at hand - and you'll be on your way to becoming a more polished public speaker!

Mistake #5: Going Over the Time Limit

I've seen speakers go over the time limit by five, ten or fifteen minutes and then look surprised when they have to be pulled off stage. And I've seen them speed up their rate of speech or flash through their last slides so fast that you can't see them.

I'm unimpressed. In fact, I'm offended. It's as if the speaker is saying to the audience, "What I have to say is much more important than anything else you might have to do or anything else any other speaker might have to say, so I'm going to blow the time limit and make you stay and listen to me."

If you are given a time limit, as a speaker it is your responsibility to cover your material within that time limit. Period. In order to do that, you need to focus on your message and practice delivering your presentation within the time limit.

Half-Life Your Presentation

When I teach the "manage your time" topic in my workshops and coaching program, I use an exercise called "Half-Life," borrowed from my improv comedy team, World Class Indifference (<http://www.worldclassindifference.com>)

In this Half-Life exercise, two people improvise a scene in 64 seconds, based on a suggestion of a location from the audience. Then the actors repeat the same scene in HALF the time (32 seconds). Rather than just talking faster, they have to cut out the extra material in the scene and focus on the essential elements. Then they do the

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same scene in 16 seconds and then in 8 seconds (and sometimes, if we're feeling lucky, in 4 seconds!).

In addition to the great fun of seeing pairs of people performing 8-second scenes simultaneously throughout the room, this exercise helps people see how editing can cut out the extra material so they can focus on the message within the time limit. When the timer starts beeping, there is no extra time.

When I demonstrated this exercise with a class recently, the 64-second scene was set in New York City, between a taxi cab driver and a potential passenger (me). We had a long discussion as to how I had arrived in New York, what sights I should see, whether I should take the cab or walk to the sights, how I was going to pay for the cab, what currency was accepted, etc. Yes, 64 seconds is a lot longer than you think!

By the 8-second version of the scene, we had edited it down to its essential elements: I had landed at JFK Airport, the taxi driver was going to drive me to the Empire State Building and we were going to stop at an ATM to get cash. The extra material, the fluff, had been cut out because there was no time to waste.

This Half-Life technique works so well that I use it for all my own presentations and workshops - and it's become a verb, as in "Half-Life my presentation" or "Half-Life my slides." I edit down to the essential elements - the message - and cut out the extra material so I don't go over the time limit. (Yes, you also have to be careful not to spend too little time presenting, but that is rarely a problem with most speakers).

The next time you have to speak in public, Half-Life it. Whether you have to present at a staff meeting, introduce yourself at a networking event or leave a voicemail for a potential client, practice cutting your material in half until you are covering the essential element, the message, within the time limit.

Mistake #6: Using Um, Ah and Filler Words

Filler words include "um," "ah," and words such as "like," "so," and "ok," which are used as a verbal bridge to the next word.

These words just fill in space while you remember your words or think of something to say next. Rather than being effective bridges, they are roadblocks, distracting the audience and interrupting the flow of your message. These filler words weaken your presentation and give the impression that you don't know what you're talking about. Starting every other sentence with fillers (for example, "you know" or "like I said") can also be interpreted as verbal expressions of your anxiety or lack of confidence.

Hear Yourself Using Fillers

Like with so many bad habits, the first step towards change is to become aware that you're using them.

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How can you become conscious of the filler words you use? Listen to yourself as you speak, record yourself or ask a friend in the audience to keep track and tell you afterwards. Or attend a Toastmasters meeting (an international organization dedicated to helping people improve their public speaking <http://www.toastmasters.org>), where there is an official Um and Ah Counter. He or she tallies up all the filler words used by the speakers and then reports on it at the end of the meeting. The point is to hear yourself using them so you can cut them out.

Try Breathing Instead

Once you have become aware of when you use fillers, you can work on eliminating them. Stop speaking when you hear yourself use a filler word. SILENTLY pause instead of filling the space with words. Breathe. Move on to your next word.

In order to practice this, try speaking for 1-2 minutes about something you know, like your job or what you did today. Every time you hear yourself using a filler word, STOP, breathe and repeat that sentence – eventually, with more practice, you will get through the entire 2 minutes without using any filler words!

Avoid These Six Mistakes, So Your Presentation Sparkles

Avoiding these six mistakes when public speaking will help you convey your message confidently and effectively. And it will ensure that the people in your audience understand your message and act on it, which is the point of giving a presentation!

About the Author

Gilda Bonanno is a trainer, speaker and coach, specializing in communication and leadership skills. She designs and delivers high-energy, client-focused training programs and workshops for corporate, academic and community clients, including Praxair, Bristol-Myers Squibb, The Hartford, and Southern CT State University.

In addition to facilitating training programs, Gilda speaks about leadership, motivation, communication and humor to groups ranging from engineers to healthcare professionals to entrepreneurs. She also coaches individuals in presentation skills, working with them to overcome their fear of public speaking, sharpen their skills and eliminate the barriers to letting their voices be heard.

Gilda also is qualified in the administration of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® and is an Authorized Distributor of Inscape Publishing instruments, including DiSC® assessments.

Gilda is President of the Southern CT chapter of the American Society for Training and Development, a member of the National Speakers Association and active in Toastmasters International. Gilda is also a member of the World Class Indifference improv comedy team, which performs shows and workshops in New York City and throughout Connecticut.

She holds a master's degree from Fordham University and an Advanced Business Certificate in Management from the University of Connecticut School of Business.

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