

# The Art of Persuasion: Skills for Everyone

October 20 - 23, 2005

## Checklist to Accompany Presentation on “Becoming a Better Public Speaker”

(This checklist is based on my experience. You may develop your own, which may have fewer items. I suspect that most of the items on this list will be on yours.)

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Decide on your Purpose. The standard purposes of a public address are:

- ◆ To inform your audience of a fact that might change their opinions.
  - ◆ To persuade your audience to share your opinion.
  - ◆ To motivate the audience to take some act.
  - ◆ To humiliate your opponents and trample them into the ground, ensuring that they will hate you forever and that the members of the audience will conclude that you are a mean and horrible person.
1. Evaluate your audience. You will need different approaches for different audiences. Is your audience made up of World War II vets, or farmers, or teenagers, or academics, or immigrants? The character of the audience will determine the arguments, the language used, and so forth.
  2. Think strategically about how best to persuade them. Realize that you are engaging with a group of persons who have minds. They may have objections to your motivations, your logic, and your evidence. Anticipate those objections and deal with them beforehand.
  3. Prepare your case. Outline it. Choose your arguments. Arrange them in the right order. Offer road signs to the audience: “I’m going to offer you three reasons to support X. They are 1, 2, and 3.” Then be sure that you actually give three reasons, and not two or four. Be sure to have a strong opening and a strong finish.

4. Be prepared. Practice your presentation. Call on friends to act as an audience. If you can't arrange that, practice in front of a mirror. Time yourself. (Remember that it's normal for the actual talk to run longer than did the practice session before a mirror.)
5. Look sharp. Dress well. For gents, I recommend a red tie (a cliché, but I think it does lend gravitas), sharp clothes, and well polished adult shoes [I mention the latter for the younger set, who may be unaccustomed to wearing professional footwear]. For the ladies, again, look sharp, make an impression, but avoid distractions, such as long and swaying necklaces, dangly earrings, and the like. (Note: There may be occasions when less formal clothing is appropriate, but in general if you want to be taken seriously, dress the part.)
6. Be on time. Don't be late, but if you're early, don't hang around like a goof. Either get there right on time, or, if you're early, spend time doing something, whether studying your notes or schmoozing and shaking hands. Don't sit around looking awkward.
7. Present the right look of authority. (That's not the same as seeming arrogant or haughty.) Don't appear to be organizing the event, rushing hither and yon organizing things, if you can avoid it.
8. Just before making your presentation, be sure to visit the lavatory. Use the facilities if you think you'll need to do so, but also, check yourself out in the mirror. Make sure your hair is right, your tie or necklace is right, that there's nothing out of place. Then look straight into the mirror and tell yourself, "I'm ready."
9. Empty your pockets of change and of other annoying or bulky items. Take out your cell phone and turn it off. The same goes for your PDA, Blackberry, and so on. Clinking change or ringing phones are annoying to the audience and will interrupt your presentation.
10. Get out a small travel clock or a watch and set it down before you. It's important that you know how long you've taken so that you can adjust your pace and add or cut as appropriate.
11. Make sure that there is a glass of water ready. It will save you if you have a coughing fit – and that does sometimes happen. It will also help you in another

- way: a glass of water gives you the opportunity to pause for a minute, to find where you are in your presentation, to collect your thoughts, and then to go on.
12. Arrange an introduction of yourself, if you can. Prepare and have with you a short statement that you'd like to be used for your introduction. If no one will introduce you, or if the host forgets, then introduce yourself: "Good evening, my name is Tom Palmer, I'm a senior fellow with the Cato Institute, and it's my pleasure to speak with you tonight about...."
  13. Start by thanking your hosts and the audience. Similarly, you should end the presentation with a wrap up and thank them for their attention.
  14. I strongly recommend against starting with the classic "ice breaking" joke.. You shouldn't start by presenting yourself as a part-time comedian or a clown. Most importantly, Don't Apologize. Don't start by saying, "I wish that I had prepared better." Don't present yourself as a loser before you've made your case. If you're late and it was due to something beyond our control, such as an airplane that was stuck on the tarmac for four hours, mention that and then go on.
  15. Make a decision about how to use the podium, if one is present:
    - a. You can use it as a prop and a barrier between you and the audience.
    - b. You can use it as a comforter and something to rest your notes on. You can use it as a source of stability and support.
    - c. You can abandon it altogether and stand directly before the audience, with no barrier between you and the audience. If you're going to do the last, move in front of or to the side of the podium, then find your place and stay there. Avoid pacing and walking back and forth. Root yourself in a comfortable pose.
  16. Have your notes or papers well organized. Don't rustle the papers. Use cards if you can; be sure to number them so that you can rearrange them easily if you drop them.
  17. Avoid reading. Know your material. I recommend using a highlighter to pick out key words. A highlighted text or set of prompts helps you to speak with the audience, not to or at them
  18. Use props when you can , but don't let them distract the audience from yourself. This is the perfect place to warn you of the dangers of PowerPoint. It is rarely

used well and frequently used badly. If you do use PowerPoint, consider it merely a supplement to your presentation, not as an opportunity to put your speech on screen and then read it aloud. Further, don't stand in the dark where the audience can't really see you and try to make some fancy graphics on a screen do all the work. You are the speaker, not the invisible narrator of a computerized graphics show.

19. Use gestures, but in a way that's natural to you. It's hard to lay down rules about gestures or facial expressions, other than that they should be natural to you. Don't look like you're acting the role of an actor in a campy musical about actors.
20. Be attentive to eye contact. Sweep the audience regularly – but not mechanically, and find 3 or 4 areas to draw your gaze. Don't just look down or stare at one point.
21. When you have finished your talk let them know that you're done. You might thank them for their time and attention. Don't let yourself just trail off and leave an awkward period during which the audience has to figure out for themselves whether you're finished.
22. If there is opportunity and time for questions, don't ask for questions. Invite the audience to a conversation: "I've told you what I think about the proposed taxpayer financing of a baseball stadium. Now I'd like to hear what your concerns are and what you have to say, so let's have a conversation."
23. If you do get questioners, there are a few things you might keep in mind. First, if you get a question, especially a hostile question, start by finding something in the question that's important and praise the questioner for posing it. A little praise will make the questioner – who had the courage to challenge you or to pose a hard question – feel special and perhaps less hostile. Moreover, it will win over other members of the audience to you. Thus, "You've put your finger on an important issue. Let's try to clarify the problem and figure out how we could determine which policy would best satisfy your concerns...etc." Never respond with, "Oh, that question. I've gotten that question so many times I could answer it in my sleep.." You may have heard the question before, but the questioner has probably not posed it before, so such a response is deeply disrespectful and will annoy both the questioner and the other members of the audience.
24. If you get disrupters, there are a few ways to handle them. Try to calm the audience and restrain them from shouting back and then outwait the disrupters.

Don't respond in kind; if you do, they win. That may not always work, but it's a better opening move than dropping down to their level and shouting at them.

25. Lastly, at the end of the discussion period, thank your hosts for the invitation and for the opportunity to think about and work through the arguments on such an important issue. Then thank the audience for their attention and for the engaging conversation. Don't do too much thanking by mentioning the people who picked you up at the airport, the people who arranged the chairs, etc., etc.

**Step back graciously or turn the program over to the host, as appropriate. You're done! You had an enjoyable conversation and you did a good job.**