The Sivv Guide to:

Effective Communication

A compendium of the world's best thinking on public speaking, writing, having conversations and more

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INTRODUCTION

'Wise men speak because they have something to say; Fools because they have to say something.'

- Plato, Ancient Greek philosopher

'What matters is not what was said but what was heard.'

- Unknown

The act of communicating, or exchanging information with other people, is central to many aspects of life. Effective communication facilitates the promotion of ideas, the discovery of new opportunities and the development of relationships. Ineffective communication can result in lost business opportunities, mistaken market shifts and even war. This guide presents a wide range of advice, techniques and frameworks that can be used to communicate more effectively. While these are primarily intended for use within relatively formal contexts, such as when giving a presentation or writing a report, the underlying principles are largely relevant to communication in any form[a].

[a] Note that this guide does not cover approaches to crafting a persuasive message, which will be addressed in a separate Sivv guide.

PUBLIC SPEAKING

'The ability to speak is a shortcut to distinction. It puts a person in the limelight, raises one head and shoulders above the crowd. And the person who can speak acceptably is usually given credit for an ability out of all proportion to what he or she really possesses.'

- Lowell Thomas, writer and broadcaster

Whether as part of a sales pitch or toasting a relative at a family celebration, public speaking fills many of us with dread. While practice is typically the best way to become an accomplished speaker, you can use the approaches and techniques detailed in this section to help you streamline your content, enhance your delivery, reduce your anxieties and improve the end result.

CONTENT

Your aim as a speaker should be to convey something that is useful, entertaining and / or interesting for your audience. Briar Goldberg, director of speaker coaching at conference organiser TED, recommends[12] adopting an 'audience before content' mentality and thinking though questions such as:

- *Why are these people taking time out of their busy schedules to listen to me speak?*
- *What do they hope (or need) to gain from this presentation?*
- *What are their expectations coming in?*
- *What can I say in order to meet or exceed those expectations?*

As Goldberg points out, you can enhance your understanding of the expectations and needs of your audience by talking to some of them in advance or asking event organisers about the profile of attendees and the way that the event has been marketed.

Journalist and TED curator Chris Anderson has observed thousands of talks from many of the world's leading public speakers. While all are unique in some way, he argues[13] that the most effective talks tend to share the following four features:

1. **Focus on one major idea.** In most talks you can only really provide the context and examples necessary to properly explain a single idea (in any case, audience members are unlikely to retain more than a small number of takeaways). All elements of a talk (including jokes, stories or statistics) should relate back to this. It can be tempting to try to convey everything that you know about a subject but doing so will simply overwhelm your audience.

2. **Give listeners a reason to care.** Before you can convey your idea, you need to win permission from the audience to do so. The best way to do this is to stir curiosity. Anderson suggests using '*intriguing, provocative questions to identify why something doesn't make sense and needs explaining*.' As he notes, '*if you can reveal a disconnection in someone's world-view they'll feel the need to bridge that knowledge gap and once you've sparked that desire it will be so much easier to start building your idea*'.

3. **Build the idea, piece by piece, using concepts that the audience already understands.** Many speakers forget that the terms and concepts they use in their day-to-day life are entirely unfamiliar to others. Vivid metaphors can be useful for explaining new or complex ideas, while you should test talks with trusted friends to identify anything that may be confusing.

4. **Convey an idea worth sharing.** If the idea that you are discussing only benefits you or your organisation, the audience is unlikely to engage. Anderson suggests that presenting information as generally applicable takeaways (e.g., *'what we have learned'*) rather than a description of success (e.g., *'look at how successful we have been'*) will make the audience more receptive. Ideas that have the potential to benefit others, change their perspective or inspire them to do something will almost certainly capture attention.

During any speech, audience members may be unable or unwilling to ask questions, so you should make it as easy as possible for them to follow-along. For example, you can introduce your speech with a short overview of what you will cover, include regular recaps and end with a clear summary of the key points that you discussed. Many speeches will be recorded (perhaps covertly) and can be easily shared, so you should also consider the needs of audiences beyond those physically present (and be wary of the risk of anything you say being taken out of context).

Effective speeches typically incorporate a strong ending that makes it clear that you have finished[h]. British politician and noted orator William Hague[14] argues that an effective ending summarises the speech without repeating too much of what has already been covered (e.g., with a new anecdote) and works as a stand-alone component that you can jump to directly if you run out of time. A 30 second 'elevator pitch' that concisely covers your key points is ideal and can also be useful when answering questions. Moreover, as Carmine Gallo notes in 'The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs'[15], your audience (including any members of the press) will be more likely to accurately relay (or respond to) what you tell them if you provide a short and memorable takeaway or call to action[i]. Professor Patrick

[h] A failure to do so can lead to awkward situations in which the audience is uncertain about whether they should continue listening or clap.

[i] Conveying a time constraint (e.g., *'sign-up by the end of today to make a difference'*) is likely to make any call to action more effective.

Henry Winston of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) advises[16] against ending a speech by thanking the audience for listening, as this suggests that they did so out of politeness and underplays the value that you have (in theory) delivered.

If you have any influence over the venue in which you are speaking, you should ensure that it is well-lit and cool (to keep your audience alert) and of an appropriate size, so that it feels neither overcrowded nor under-attended (which has negative connotations). Similarly, it is best to avoid speaking slots that are very early, very late or either side of lunch, when attendance tends to be lower and the audience is less likely to be alert and focused.

ANTICIPATING TECHNICAL ISSUES

To reduce the chances of encountering a technical glitch during your talk:

- → Check that all relevant equipment works ahead of the speech.
- → Run through the presentation in its entirety and bring a back-up copy in case the organiser's computer malfunctions.
- → Turn off the projector if it is not being used to ensure that it will not display anything irrelevant or distracting.
- → Consider showing a video rather than giving a live demonstration (this will reduce the number of things that can go wrong).
- → Test the microphone and ensure that you are standing at an appropriate distance from it. If wearing a microphone, make sure to turn it off and remove it once you have finished speaking.
- → Consider using a second screen, separate from the computer displaying your presentation, to show notes or other useful information.

If glitches do occur, realise that most audiences will be understanding and make sure not to panic.

DELIVERY

'It's not what you say that matters but the manner in which you say it; there lies the secret of the ages.'

- William Carlos Williams, Pulitzer-prize winning poet

If delivered poorly, even highly compelling content can be rendered ineffective, so it is vital that you practice your speech before giving it. You can start by practicing your delivery to an empty room and then, ideally, in front of people that are representative of the ultimate audience and in the same venue (or one similar) as the speech itself. While doing this, it can be useful to look for signs of engagement or boredom (e.g., nodding, smiling or yawning) that indicate which parts of the speech are resonating and which need to be changed.

In the absence of a test audience, videoing your speech and reviewing it yourself represents the next best option (practicing in front of a mirror tends to be too distracting). Either approach should identify potential improvements and highlight issues relating to delivery and content, including distracting mannerisms or statements that are unclear or that do not translate well from written to spoken format.

Developing a strong familiarity with your material will help you deal with questions and interruptions without losing your flow and enable you to spend less time looking at your notes and more time connecting with your audience. However, memorising speeches (or, worse, reading them from a script or teleprompter) can hinder your ability to improvise or adapt your content to reflect audience feedback,

and may result in a less natural or even wooden delivery. Some of the most powerful speeches in history, including Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' refrain, have been wholly or partially improvised.

In 'TED Talks'[18] Chris Anderson notes that even if your speech is 'unscripted', your preparation should leave you with a good idea of much of what you are going to say[j]. He suggests that your preparation should focus on perfecting your transitions so that you do not skip anything important and notes that you may find it useful to memorise bullet points that you can put into your own words when presenting.

USING NOTES

Entrepreneur Otegha Uwagba[17] argues that, while presenting from memory can look slick and polished, using notes during a speech can provide a welcome confidence boost, especially if you are nervous or have had little time to prepare. After all, looking at notes occasionally should not hamper your delivery or make you seem less credible and is preferable to getting muddled during the speech. She suggests using cue cards with prompts, key words or the starts of sentences to jog your memory (these should be bound together to keep them in order).

In 'The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs' Carmine Gallo suggests that it is better to use presentation slides (instead of hand-held notes) as cues. If you do need to use notes, he recommends positioning them so that you can glance at them inconspicuously during the speech.

You should take care to maintain an appropriate tempo (slowing down when addressing non-expert or international audiences) and project your voice[k]. Particularly when nervous, many people have a tendency to speak too quickly and quietly. Deliberately varying your pace, volume and tone of voice (e.g., speeding-up to convey excitement or slowing-down to emphasise importance) can help to keep your audience engaged (few things deter this more effectively than a monotonous delivery).

Many of us unknowingly use an upward inflection at the end of sentences (known as 'uptalk'), which makes everything we say sound like a question. This can also make us seem less professional or even insecure, so is something to watch out for. Similarly, you should avoid using 'filler' noises like 'um' and 'ah', which can frustrate your audience and make you appear anxious, unprepared, uncertain of what you are saying or incompetent. You can reduce your tendency to use filler noises by practicing the speech, removing distractions, inhaling when you catch yourself using them and carefully planning transitions between topics or slides[19].

Communication during a speech is not entirely one way and you can use audience reaction or interaction to gauge how you are performing. If, for example, your jokes do not appear to be resonating, it is probably a good idea to omit them from the rest of the speech. Some speakers even place 'spotters' in the audience to provide real-time feedback on their delivery (e.g., relating to tempo and volume) and guidance on time constraints.

[j] Some speakers opt to define and memorise just the beginning and ending of their speech, given that these are the most important elements.

[k] Consider checking with the audience that they can hear you at the beginning of the speech.

Certain oratory techniques, when applied in moderation, can significantly enhance a speech. As communication expert Stephen Cohen notes, *'just as music can stir the emotions, language that appeals to the ear can lift people's sights and spirits, inspiring them to do things that they would otherwise not'*[20]. In 'You Talkin' To Me?: Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama'[21], Sam Leith outlines a number of useful techniques, including:

- **Anaphora / epistrophe.** Repetition of words or phrases at the beginning or end of successive statements, for example Martin Luther King's repeated use of *'I have a dream'*.
- **Chiasmus.** Reversing the first half of a statement in the second half, for example John F. Kennedy's *'Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country'*.
- **Hypophora.** Raising a question and then immediately providing an answer.
- **Tricolon.** Using three words or phrases that are linked to each other and delivered one after another in quick succession, for example Benjamin Franklin's *'Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn'*.

Deliberate pauses can also be used to enhance the impact of important statements.

Expressing a vulnerability (even if this involves admitting that you are feeling nervous or overwhelmed) or telling a joke or anecdote near the beginning of a speech can help you connect with your audience and avoid appearing insincere or aloof. Stories are also a good way to engage people, help them relate to the subject being covered and remember your talk. Engaging stories tend to follow a standard 'narrative arc', which generally involves establishing a relatable character, introducing a challenge then describing how it was successfully resolved and the lesson that was learned.

Incorporating regular interaction (e.g., by stimulating laughter or clapping or asking a question) should help to keep your audience engaged. Note however that humour should be used with care as a joke that flops (or, even worse, offends) will leave the audience feeling awkward and can be difficult to recover from.

Above all, speakers deemed to be charismatic[l] are most likely to engage their audience and convey their message effectively. Charisma can be a difficult concept to define but may be thought of as *'the ability to communicate a clear, visionary, and inspirational message that captivates and motivates an audience'*[22].

Perhaps surprisingly, research[23] suggests that charisma is not entirely innate and can be enhanced through the following verbal and non-verbal tactics:

[l] Note that charisma can be dangerous, for instance if it is used to manipulate opinion or hide incompetence.

- → Using metaphors, similes and analogies to enable the audience to understand, relate to and remember the message.
- → Using stories and anecdotes to connect with the audience and make the message more engaging.
- → Demonstrating credibility and alignment with the audience by articulating moral convictions and shared sentiments.
- → Setting ambitious goals and conveying confidence that they can be achieved.
- → Using contrasts, which clarify the message.
- → Three-part lists, which are easy to remember, suggest a pattern and convey a sense of completeness.
- → Rhetorical questions, which arouse anticipation and boost engagement.
- → Using body language (e.g., expressive hand gestures), facial expressions and an animated voice (varying tone and volume or using pauses, which convey control) to demonstrate emotion and passion.

Creating a sense of urgency, invoking history, discussing sacrifices and using humour can, to a lesser extent, also enhance charisma in some contexts.

Research[24] also suggests that you can boost your influence and perceived prestige by lowering the pitch of your voice. This technique is particularly useful if you are nervous, as stress tightens your vocal cords and, in doing so, increases your pitch. Before speaking, you may also find it helpful to 'wake-up' your voice by reciting 'tongue-twisters' or taking a short walk. Similarly, British politician William Hague notes that maintaining physical fitness is useful as it enables you to deliver long sentences without breaking for breath. It is also important to stay well hydrated, so you should arrange to have a bottle of water within easy reach during any talk[m].

During a speech, your non-verbal communication strongly influences how you are perceived and, in some cases, how you feel. Ideally, you should:

- → Smile and consciously maintain positive body language, using natural hand gestures and facial expressions (smiling is also naturally calming) that convey confidence, passion or excitement for the subject matter and appreciation for the opportunity to speak.
- → Avoid standing behind a podium, which creates a barrier between you and the audience.

[m] While alcohol may help to calm any nerves, it is dehydrating and may hamper your ability to answer questions effectively.

→ Maintain regular eye-contact with your audience, making sure to turn your gaze to different sections and avoid focusing on the same person repeatedly.

→ Organise a timer that you can check discreetly. This allows you to keep track of time without constantly checking your watch.

Particularly in large venues, you may also need to exaggerate your gestures and facial expressions to make them clear for everyone present.

For many of us, public speaking can be a source of considerable anxiety that can jeopardise our performance. This is often exacerbated by our natural tendency to overestimate how much other people are paying attention to us and how harshly they judge our mistakes (psychologists refer to this as the 'spotlight effect'). Research suggests that rituals (i.e., predefined sequences of symbolic actions) can reduce our anxiety and increase our focus before we speak[25], perhaps because they help us feel disciplined and focused. Reframing the speech as a conversation and trying to stay focused on the present moment (i.e., not fixating on the future implications) or the reason why you are presenting may also help[26]. Moreover, 'self-distancing' techniques, such as assessing your emotions in the third person (e.g., '*Bob feels anxious*' rather than '*I feel anxious*') have been shown to diminish anxiety associated with public speaking and improve performance[27]. As an extreme form of self-distancing, many performers adopt an on-stage alter ego, which research indicates may actually be beneficial[28]. Simple breathing exercises (e.g., three cycles of breathing-in for three seconds, then out for three seconds) can counter our tendency to take shallow breaths when anxious and help us calm down, while reframing anxiety as excitement may have a similar effect[n]. Some people also find it helpful to identify some friendly faces in the audience and focus on these as they speak, while having a script to hand as a back-up plan may provide additional reassurance.

WHAT TO WEAR

You should dress in smart, comfortable clothes that make you feel confident but are not distracting. In 'TED Talks' Chris Anderson recommends dressing in a similar manner to your audience but slightly smarter and wearing something bright that can be seen from the back of the venue. He also recommends wearing a belt so that you have something to clip a microphone to, avoiding noisy jewellery and practicing in the clothes you plan to wear to spot any potential issues.

PRESENTATIONS

An accompanying presentation can enhance a speech but is not always desirable. For instance, a pre-prepared presentation defines a structure that can be difficult to deviate from, representing an unhelpful restriction in some situations.

When designing a presentation, we can avoid a number of common mistakes by:

[n] See the **Sivv Guide to Wellbeing** for more on this.

- → Using a slide template to maintain consistency of alignment, colour scheme and font.
- → Including slide numbers to make the presentation easier for audience members to reference.
- → Ensuring that all text (including labels on charts) is legible. To do so, we should use a font that is simple and clear, select a text colour that has a strong contrast with the background, and avoid underlining or italicising, which can make words harder to read.
- → Maintaining a margin on each slide, which improves the look of the presentation and mitigates the cropping applied by some projectors or screens.
- → Altering content to reflect the specific screen or venue size.

In 'TED Talks' Chris Anderson suggests that presentations should be designed with a 16:9 aspect ratio (which will fit with most screens or projectors) and warns against using templates provided by presentation software, as the result will feel generic.

In addition, Oxford University careers adviser Jonathan Black offers the following advice[29] for crafting an effective presentation:

- → Tell people what you are going to tell them (using an agenda slide), tell them (the body of the presentation) then tell them what you told them (with a summary slide).
- → Content should follow a logical progression, with each slide conveying one main idea and used for at least one minute.
- → Slide backgrounds should be simple and text limited (ideally highlighting key statistics or numbers, which may be missed or misheard).
- → Use graphics to show content that would be too difficult or time consuming to describe (e.g., maps or photographs) and avoid distracting animations.
- → Explain what charts or graphics show before discussing why this is important.
- → Help audience members understand where in the presentation they are. For instance, display a progress tracker or signal how many slides will be reviewed or how long the presentation will last at the beginning.

Black also notes that audiences do not always consume all of the content provided and recommends that we design our presentations to make it as easy as possible for them to get the main gist. A good way to achieve this is to follow a structure that provides what Barbara Minto[o] describes as 'horizontal' and 'vertical' logic: each slide should have a (non-generic) headline that conveys its key point (so the headlines alone combine to form a logical argument), with content below each conveying why it is

[o] See below on the Pyramid Principle.

important and providing supporting evidence. Each slide should also be easy to understand without further explanation.

Similarly, Professor Henry Winston of MIT notes that most people are incapable of reading and listening concurrently (the human brain contains only one language processor) so are likely to stop listening to a speaker if slides contain too much information. Slides should therefore be kept simple and, when they do include important information, we should pause to give the audience time to read them.

Your audience is less likely to become distracted while trying to take notes if you provide an email address through which they can request a copy of your presentation (this is also a good way to expand your network). Alternatively, you can prepare a printed copy or summary of the presentation (or further information on something that you have covered) and distribute it once you have finished speaking.

Winston further suggests that you should be careful when interacting with your presentation. For example, if you stand on the opposite side of a stage to the screen you will force the audience to move their gaze back and forth between yourself and the presentation. Moreover, engaging with or pointing to a presentation (e.g., using a laser pointer) can result in long periods in which the audience is looking at the back of your head, diminishing your connection and making it harder to hear what you say. If you do want to draw attention to specific elements on your slides, you should instead highlight these with colourful borders or arrows.

Finally, Winston highlights the importance of using your last slide wisely. This may be displayed for a long period so simply including 'thank you' or 'questions' represents a wasted opportunity to emphasise your key message (and provide your contact details, if relevant).

Interesting or unexpected props, demonstrations or surprises can make a presentation more engaging and memorable. For example, Microsoft founder Bill Gates generated significant amounts of publicity when he released live mosquitos into the auditorium during a TED talk[31] on malaria. There is, however, a risk that such stunts backfire if you are not careful.

In 'The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs' Carmine Gallo suggests that you plan to incorporate videos or demonstrations after around 10 minutes of speaking, which is the point at which most people in an audience start to lose concentration (TED talks are deliberately capped at 18 minutes for this reason).

THE 10/20/30 RULE

Author and investor Guy Kawasaki suggests[30] that you follow what he calls the '10/20/30 rule' and ensure that presentations comprise ten slides, last no more than 20 minutes and use a font size no smaller than 30 points (thus limiting the amount of information on each slide). This approach forces you to include only the most salient information and develop a solid understanding of your material (as you cannot rely solely on the slide content). As he points out, if your audience realises that you are simply reading out the text on your slides, they will start reading themselves and everyone will end up out of sync. The rule also encompasses Kawasaki's suggestion that you should assume that you have less time than you have officially been allocated. Late arrivals and technical issues often cause delays, while strictly limiting the length of the presentation helps to save time for discussion and questions, which are typically far more valuable.

Such ‘breaks’ can be an effective way to reengage the audience. To add additional variety or increase the credibility of your message, it can sometimes be helpful to involve other people, such as an expert or customer, who can join onstage or via a live video call.

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