Making Sure The Message is Clear

- Making certain that your message is clear is a prime concern of speakers. And rightly so. Your presentation can be lively, entertaining, charming and engaging, but if it isn't clear to your listeners, it has not accomplished its goal. First foremost, you audience must understand what you are saying and

- A prime factor is assuring clarity to your audience is being clear, yourself, about your material. Knowing your subject well is key to your success. So is organizing the presentation. Finally, it is essential that you practice so that you feel comfortable with your presentation and confident that you can deliver it smoothly in the way you planned.

The following techniques will help you organize and present your information so your ideas are clear to your audience.

- 1. Limit the scope of the presentation.
  - Listeners really do not want to hear everything there is to say about the subject. They want, instead, a presentation on a focused aspect of the subject. People can absorb only limited amounts of information through listening.
  - Generally try to work with the rule of three: 'Three reasons why..", Three methods of..", "Three benefits to...", etc. Three main ideas are about all most listeners can absorb. And three main ideas are not too burdensome for the speaker to present.
  - Whether you have limited the speech to three ideas, two or four, set limits on the scope of the presentation. Follow the KISS principle: "Keep it simple, stupid."

- 2. Overview the Main Points in the Introduction.
  - A clear overview of the main ideas will set the scope for the presentation and will tell the audience what to listen for and in what order.
  - Knowing what to anticipate greatly enhances comprehension and diminishes confusion and anxiety.
  - It may be necessary to tell the audience what you will not (or cannot) address, stressing what you will cover instead. This will set the ground rules from the beginning and will dispel any sense of disappointment on the part of the audience. It will contribute significantly to a heightened sense of clarity and enhances the image of the speaker as a sensitive, audience-centered communicator.

- **3. Find a Pattern.**
  - The speaker who organizes ideas using a pattern will find it easier to deliver the presentation, and easier for the audience to follow.

  - Once the listeners understand the pattern, they can follow ideas more easily, better understand the relationships among the ideas and anticipate where the speaker is going.

  - For the speaker, the pattern serves as a reassuring framework and helps lessen stage fright.

If a pattern for organizing your main concepts is obvious, use it. Such patterns include:

- Time Order

- Space Order

- Cause Effect Order

- Pro-Con Order (AKA Advantages - Disadvantages Order; Assets - Liabilities Order)

- Problem - Solution Order

- By Degrees Order (Least to Most; Easiest to Hardest, etc.)

- Sometimes, no obvious pattern presents itself. In that case, rely on Topical Order.
- That is, divide the subject into topics and use them as the organizing motif.
- For example, if you were to describe how a new law will affect a community, you can divide the community into parts:, residential, business, and public service agencies.
- Because Topical Order is not as obvious as Time Order or Space Order, put special effort into the Overview and Review steps.
- The audience can get lost easily without assistance from the speaker.
- Connectives, too, are especially important when using Topical Order.

- 4. For each Main Idea, use a <u>5-step</u> sequence:

  - State it,
  - Define it,
  - Explain it,
  - Give an Example of it,
  - and Restate it.

  If you use these 5 elements as a check-list for developing each main idea, you will be assured of clarity.

- This format replicates the old formula about the only 3 things you need to know about public speaking:

  – Tell them what you're going to say. (State it.)

  – Say it. (Explain it.)

  – Tell them what you just said. (Restate it.)

  The "Define it" and "Give an example of it" steps are added for extra clarity.

- **5. Define your terms.**
  - One of the most common (and annoying) mistakes speakers make is forgetting that the audience may not know what your terms mean OR they may use the term to mean something different.
  - Make a point of defining your terms to your audience. You may do this by resorting to dictionary definitions or you may use a casual or informal definition prefaced with something like "When I use the word X, I mean...".
  - Whether formal or informal, as long as everyone is "singing from the same song sheet," you are much more assured of achieving clarity of ideas.

  - Audio visual aids are enormously helpful here. Both seeing and hearing new words will enhance audience comprehensive tremendously.

– The importance of defining your terms cannot be overemphasized in presentations that are technical in nature or where you are addressing a general audience about a specialized subject.

– Many speakers "turn off" an audience by failing to tell what a word means or by using jargon, abbreviations or other specialized terms that leave out listeners.

– Speakers who do this run the risk of presenting themselves as arrogant, indifferent or "power-tripping.

– Almost everyone who is a specialist or a professional speaks some kind of jargon. When one uses these terms constantly, it is very hard to remember that others do not use them at all or do not use them in the same way.

– Try, try, try to remember that we may all use the same words but we don't necessarily use them to mean the same thing.

- 6. Give examples
- Examples are so commonly used that we take them for granted. Almost nothing helps explain an idea better than an example.
- Examples clarify, add interest, scope and relevance and indicate that you understand your listeners' needs and know their frame of reference.
- Examples help establish common ground between speaker and audience and will often be the most memorable element in your speech. Ask yourself if you have offered an example or illustration of each idea you wish to convey to your audience.

- Examples drive home your ideas, make abstract concepts understandable and pertinent and provide a highly effect way to remember ideas long after the presentation is over.

- 7. Tell a story

- A story is one of the best techniques for achieving clarity.

- Stories also add interest to a presentation and provide the most memorable way of remembering ideas.

- Adult learners learn best from stories.

- 8. Use vivid language
- The clarity of your ideas can be greatly enhanced through the use of vivid language. Interestingly, many people assume that a good speaker is supposed to use highly abstract, "high falootin" language.
- Nothing could be further from the truth.
- The use of language that is colorful, evocative, concrete, familiar and to the point, enhances the clarity of your ideas and the quality of your presentation immeasurably.

- 9. Audio/Visual Aids
- Some things are more understandable if we can see a representation of them. This applies to the obvious examples such as photos of people and places, schematics of processes and procedures, graphs and charts, new words and terms and video clips and audio recordings of events.
- Two often over-looked applications of audio/visual aids which greatly increase the clarity of a speech are:
  - 1), writing out new terms, key concepts and foreign words and
  - 2.) using audio-visual aids to reinforce numerical data.

- New terms, foreign words and numbers need visual reinforcement for understanding, clarity and impact. Fortunately, these applications are quite simple and do not require elaborate preparation.
- A word of caution: Use prepared audio-visual aids.
- Unfortunately, stage fright contributes to embarrassing misspellings and mathematical errors among even the most educated and knowledgeable speakers.
- In addition, blackboards often have no chalk on their ledges and flip charts frequently appear without markers, leaving the speaker fumbling for resources when he or she should look like the picture of organization and composure.

- The investment of time in preparing audio-visual aids will be well worth it and will lessen stage fright.

- 10. Presenting numbers effectively
- Because many speakers use numbers extensively, techniques for the clear presentation of numerical information require special attention.
- First, use numbers sparingly. Numbers are very hard to process through listening and their significance is lost on even the most intelligent members of the audience. Hearing a lot of numbers said (or worse, read) aloud will put anyone to sleep.
- So before you include extensive numerical information, ask yourself whether its necessary or just available.

- Compare the numbers to something the audience is familiar with and understands.
- Telling us that there are 55 million people living in Italy is meaningless to most. Comparing it to one/fifth of the US population, or saying it is the combined population of New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania will make the numbers much more meaningful.
- Telling us the number of people who die from cigarette-related ailments is sad but without significance. Telling us it would be as if a jumbo jet filled with passengers crashed every day of the year is much more meaningful.

- Round off numbers whenever possible. As above, most listeners simply cannot appreciate the significance of numerical data. Make it simple for them.
- Round off numbers unless it is unethical to do so.

- Use audio-visual aids to promote comprehension of numbers. A graph, a chart, the actual numbers written out for the audience to see will increase comprehension dramatically.
- Do not expect your audience to do math in their heads while listening to your presentation. Give them the answer. Explain the meaning. Tell the audience what you want them to know. Draw the conclusion for them.

- 11. Cue

- Cueing calls attention to what immediately follows.

- Common examples of cueing include, "Now listen carefully...." "What will this do for you?...," "The most important thing I want to leave you with today is...." etc

- Quite simply, if you want to make sure the audience gets your idea, tell them to listen. And they will!

- 12. Use connectives
- Connectives are words or phrases that help connect one idea to another. A speaker who uses connectives well assures that his listeners will not get lost when moving from one idea to another in the presentation.

- Common examples of connectives are
  - ""Now that we have discussed X, let's turn our attention to..."
  - But X is only one part of...The other part is..,"
  - "So much for the present. What about the future?,„
  - "The first contributing factor to X is...The second is...The third is...The final..."

  Use the "Restate it" step in your outline as a connective linking each main idea to the next.

- 13. Find Common Ground.

- In order to assist your audience in understanding your ideas, find common ground whenever possible.

- Common ground issues are shared experiences, values, concerns, aspirations, fears, worries, background, etc.

- Explain your ideas as they relate to your audience.

- 14. Review your main ideas in the conclusion of the speech.
- The conclusion is the last chance the speaker has to make his or her ideas clear to the audience.
- Studies have shown that people remember best what they hear last.
- Many of us remember the beginnings and endings of experiences better than what happened in-between.
- Take advantage of this last opportunity to review your main ideas once more before ending with a power punch close.