

PUBLIC SPEAKING TO AMERICANS

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THE 10 FIRST ESSENTIALS FOR SPEAKING TO AMERICANS

1. Television defines for Americans what constitutes good rhetoric.
2. American rhetoric has a much stronger religious foundation to it than the rhetoric of other nations.
3. Americans tend to have a shorter attention span than listeners elsewhere.
4. American rhetoric is much more narrative-based than the rhetoric of most other nations.
5. Americans now tend to expect their speakers to “listen” to them and interact with them frequently. This has come about primarily because of the rise of computer culture.
6. Americans tend to interrupt others in conversation frequently.
7. American speech tends to be heavily laden with metaphors and many come from the worlds of sports, war, and gambling.
8. Americans are technology-crazy but don’t give in to it.
9. Video and phone conferencing are not an international lawyer’s best friend.
10. Know a few of the major tricks of speaking with an interpreter. They may even be helpful in other contexts.

OVERVIEW: SPEAKING TO AMERICAN AUDIENCES

STEVEN STARK

Speaking to Americans in a CLE or other context isn't the easiest task in the world. Here are six brief tips for making your presentation memorable and easier to deliver.

1) KEEP IT SIMPLE. The major mistake lawyers make when they speak to any audience is that they lose themselves trying to make too fine a point. As a speech coach once told me, "You're not painting a portrait; you're putting a frame around one."

We lawyers are creatures of the written word so we often forget that the written word is the medium of complexity. The spoken word is not. Even if you're speaking to an audience of Harvard PhD's, their ability to absorb the spoken word is far less than it is with the written one. At best, your audience will probably remember a paragraph or two of what you said and maybe a few key lines or a story.

Therefore, organize your material around one or two themes. Ask yourself before you begin, if my audience can only take home 50 words, what do I want them to remember? Then construct your talk around those.

Remember the story about the late Judge Friendly on the Second Circuit. A lawyer got up for oral argument and said, "Your Honor, I've got five points I'd like to make." Judge Friendly put up his hand. "Just give me your best one," he said.

Your audience is a lot like Judge Friendly, if not worse.

2) KEEP IT SHORT. Audiences approach presentations with a certain sense of dread. You may be the world's loveliest speaker. People may talk for months afterwards about how your speech moved them. The problem is that while they're listening, they think they would rather be doing anything else -- even having root canal work or sitting in traffic on the M1 (or the M5 or the railways or the tube).

That doesn't mean you should cut your presentation more than necessary -- you're there to deliver information. But it does mean that shorter is better. You should adjust expectations. If you're going to speak for 20 minutes, far better to begin by saying you're going to speak for 25 or 30. Then, when you finish "early," your audience is eternally grateful. If you're on a panel and the person before you goes on too long, adjust and speak for less time. Your audience will thank you for that as well.

3) DON'T READ A PRESENTATION. When you see someone reading a speech, what do you think? Maybe that the speaker isn't prepared or had someone draft the text or really doesn't mean what she is saying. Whatever the thought, it's rarely a good one. It's important for you to talk from the heart and read nothing.

Forty years ago, this never would have been a rule. Speakers used to read speeches all the time, and audiences thought nothing of it. But television changed everything. Viewers are now accustomed to the notion that people speak off the cuff and sound natural and eloquent. The irony, of course, is that almost all those TV speakers are reading, either from a teleprompter or from cue cards. Nevertheless, the fiction shapes reality. Speak from a text and your audience dismisses you.

If you hand out written materials, don't have the audience follow them as you speak. (Tell them to look at the papers afterwards.) Sadly, audiences are easily distracted: You want them to pay attention to you -- not something in front of them or elsewhere in the room. Which brings us to the next point, which is . . .

4) DON'T OVERUSE POWERPOINT. Sad but true: Despite all the hype, PowerPoint has done more to hurt the cause of effective speaking than

almost anything else over the last two decades. That isn't to say it doesn't have a role. It helps to be organized. Graphics do help audiences understand some things better.

But this is one tool that is now vastly overused. Far better to spend your time practicing your talk than working with a computer program which, after all, isn't going to speak to anyone. Graphics on a screen lead the audience away from you -- not towards you. (Other visual aids that draw the audience to you can be better.) We live in a terribly sophisticated visual culture and unless your graphics are on a level with Spielberg or George Lucas, they're likely to come off as amateurish.

I once saw a spoof on PowerPoint in which the author speculated as to what might have happened if Martin Luther King had discovered the use of PowerPoint. He put up a graphic "I = Dream." He had the phrase "not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" change color. The point was obvious: We remember King's speech -- as we remember almost any memorable presentation -- by what we hear, not by what we see. Leave the moviemaking to others.

5) BE CONCRETE AND TELL STORIES. Audiences remember specifics, not abstractions. Therefore, the more you can ground your

presentation in illustrations -- not concepts -- the likelier it is that people will remember what you say. This is very difficult for lawyers who deal, after all, with abstractions as their bread and butter.

In the Bible, when Christ got up to speak, he didn't begin by saying, "I want to discourse today about Rule 7 (b)(2)." If he had, no one would have listened to him. Instead, he told parables, which are, of course, stories that illustrate the concepts and principles he was trying to get people to remember. Ronald Reagan was "the great communicator" not because he promulgated a memorable set of ideas or even sound bites, but because he was a wonderful storyteller.

6) LEARN TO LISTEN AND INVOLVE THE AUDIENCE.

Lawyers tend to be egocentric speakers. When you're presenting technical material, however -- and frequently we are -- it's essential for you to allow the audience to participate as much as possible. This helps alleviate boredom and permits those listening to clear up any questions they have as you go along. It also allows them to relate to you in a favorable way. A presentation shouldn't be like playing a symphony; it's more like jazz where you improvise, only here to meet the needs of your audience.

Make yourself accessible. Speaking from a podium separates you from your audience, giving the subtle message that you are unapproachable. Far better in speaking to be "one of the gang." If speaking in a conference room, sit in the middle. Encourage questions and use hypotheticals. Don't call on people randomly (it's too reminiscent of the Socratic method in law school!) but think about using an exercise that can loosen up an audience, thus encouraging them to become involved. The more you can break up a presentation, the better off you are.