

# Are Your Students Communicating Effectively?

*“If you’re in the presence of a true expert, you will understand everything they say. If you don’t understand what someone is saying, they are not an expert.” – Nido Qubein*

As a graduate student going to one of my first conferences, I remember my advisor telling me that if I’d truly mastered my subject I’d be able to talk about it cogently in a variety of settings:

1. in a 1-hour seminar;
2. in a 5 minute conversation at a poster session; and
3. in 2 minutes during a coffee break.

As a faculty member watching my students give presentations, that advice comes to mind again. Different formats require different skills. How could I help my students learn to communicate clearly, concisely, and confidently? And how could I help them learn from the presentations of their classmates, so that end-of-semester oral presentations truly were a valuable use of their time?

## Establish the goals

If you will be requiring your students to make oral presentations at the end of the semester, take 15 minutes of class time 3–4 weeks before then to talk about them. Lay out some strategies for your students to use by having them consider the framework of an effective presentation, and consider demonstrating “good” and “bad” techniques.

The list of criteria below is adapted from the AACU VALUE rubric on oral communication. You may want to refer to the rubric for more extensive information.

- 1. Central Message:** What’s the main point? What do you want your listeners to remember from that presentation? Make it vivid; make it memorable. State it at the beginning of the talk in your introduction, and reiterate it in a summary at the end.
- 2. Delivery Techniques:** Engage your listeners by making eye contact with them. Modulate your voice to emphasize what’s important. Don’t read from slides or index cards. (Yes, this may require practicing the talk a few times!)
- 3. Language:** Clearly formed sentences reflect – and convey – a clear understanding of the topic. Use the terminology of the discipline correctly. If you are referring to someone else’s work and you are unsure how to pronounce his or her last name, ask your instructor.
- 4. Organization:** Presentations should be structured in the same way that a good essay might be. Take the time to include an introduction and overview of the main points. Separate the presentation into clear sections. Support main points with evidence. Summarize at the end, reiterating the main points.
- 5. Supporting Materials:** Supporting materials are most credible when they are relevant, link clearly to the topic, and are from reliable sources. Using a variety of supporting materials – a list of examples, diagrams of experiments, data tables, vivid images or quotations – further enhances their credibility. Slides are designed to reinforce the organization of the talk, contain an appropriate amount of

information, and use visual cues to indicate main ideas, supporting details, and transitions to new topics.\

### **Assess the presentations**

To keep the student-listeners focused, state your expectations for them as well. Do you want them to ask questions? (Will you be keeping track?) Do you want them to write a 1-paragraph summary of what they learned from each presentation? Perhaps add a list of questions they still have?

Add a metacognitive component by having your students evaluate their peers' presentations. Have them explicitly evaluate the quality of the presentation itself by answering two questions:

1. What did the speaker do in the presentation that was especially effective?
2. What might the speaker do differently to enhance his/her presentation?

Addition of these two questions will help students reflect on what makes a presentation effective, and will help them think differently about their own presentations. For maximum impact, compile the responses to the questions and give each student a list of the responses for their own presentation.

### **Resources:**

- **AACU VALUE rubric for oral communication.** Retrieved on 2/8/2017 from <http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/oral-communication>
- **Sample peer evaluation form** for class presentations. (Modify as you like.) <https://www.dropbox.com/s/6vfhcb2c0icu1th/EvalForm.doc?dl=0>

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