

Communicating with a Large Audience

This chapter will enable you to:

- ▶ Improve your ability to tailor your writing and to speak to the purpose, audience, and medium.
- ▶ Organize your ideas.
- ▶ Be aware of common mistakes.
- ▶ Identify resources for improving your writing and public speaking.

For many people, writing and public speaking are two of the most difficult means of communication. The challenge arises in part from a lack of practice. You may communicate mostly through informal conversation, but there will be times when you need to employ public speaking or written communication, whether as a presentation to the chamber of commerce, a regular newsletter, or a request to the city council for a zoning variance to build a roof over your vendors' stalls.

This chapter addresses both writing and public speaking because the two share some important characteristics—both are primarily one-way communications in which you deliver a message to a group rather than interacting interpersonally and require knowledge of your audience and the intended message, organization and planning, and attention to detail and accuracy. Your success can enhance or undermine your credibility, and both writing and public speaking are learned skills.

If you follow some guidelines and practice with some regularity, you can develop your writing and public-speaking skills.

Writing Effectively

Plan before You Write

Before you begin to write, think about the purpose, audience, and medium of communication involved. Electronic communication has become so common that many people use the informal style of instant messaging or "chat" as their writing style even when the purpose, audience, and medium call for more formal writing. While quick messages to friends or even to colleagues allow for abbreviations, incomplete and run-on sentences, and emoticons (those little symbols like ;-)) that pop up in emails), memoranda, newsletters, and formal letters and notices require a more formal style and attention to correct grammar, punctuation, and usage.

Another common problem is overly formal writing. Make your sentences as short as possible while conveying your meaning. Add descriptive words only when they

are needed to make your meaning clear. Have someone read your documents to be sure you have conveyed the intended message.

The Writing Process

Before you begin writing, it is important think about the overall message and intended audience. Consider the following ideas before you start writing.



Determine the basic purpose of the message. It is difficult to write clearly if you do not know the purpose of the communication. Are you trying to direct, inform, or persuade someone? More specifically, who are you trying to persuade, and to do what?

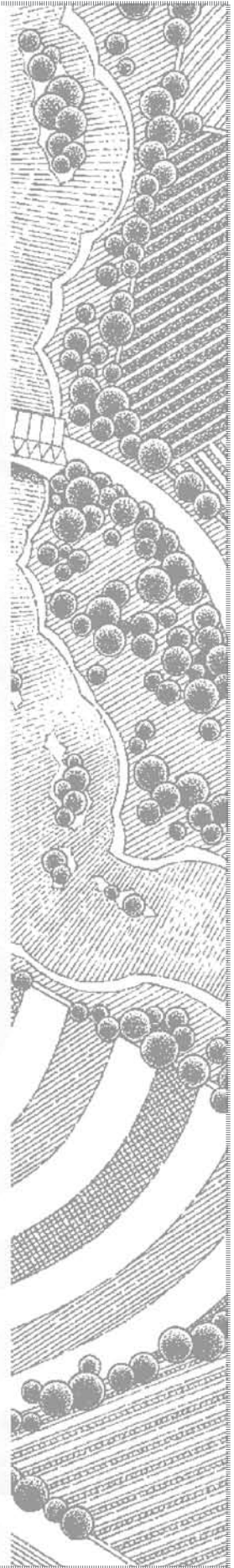
Consider the audience. Your tone and content will likely change based on who the intended audience is. A letter to the mayor will be different from a letter to a community group. Think about the style of your writing before you begin.

Collect and evaluate the information you need before beginning to write. Many people begin writing before they have enough information. This can lead to frustration and writer's block. Do the research first and then your writing.

Organize and divide your material into principal topics. Outlines are invaluable tools in the writing process. Writing will come much easier if you know what you want to say before you start.

Write your first draft. Give yourself a break during your first attempt at writing a document. Remember, it does not have to be perfect in the beginning. Write out as much as you can and then put it aside for awhile. If you have time, a day or two is generally a good amount of time in which to get fresh perspective on what you have already produced. You may find that the document "writes itself" in your head while you are sleeping once you have a basic outline down on paper. Good writing takes time. Chances are that you will see things differently if you separate yourself from it for awhile.

Write a second draft (and a third and a fourth, if necessary). Refine your writing until it says what you want. It is often useful to have a colleague or friend read your draft and give you feedback. If they do not know the subject, even better. You will know you have been clear if they understand the message even though they do not know the specifics. Also, always proofread for spelling and grammar mistakes. A typographical error can invalidate even the most effective message and make the reader question the abilities of the writer.



Watch Out For . . . Common Mistakes in Writing

Some mistakes are so common that most people are barely aware of them, but for others, they are so glaring that they undermine the credibility of the writer. Rather than publish an exhaustive list, we have included a few common errors and listed two helpful resources to help you avoid errors and improve your writing.

Frequent Errors

- Using an apostrophe where none is needed
 - First plum's of the season!
(no apostrophe needed to make a plural)
 - Get your's today!
(no apostrophe with a possessive pronoun)
- Mixing up homonyms; that is, words that sound the same

For example:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| ■ there, their, and they're | ■ too, to, and two |
| ■ here and hear | ■ where and wear |
| ■ it's and its | ■ you're and your |
| ■ affect and effect | ■ counsel and council |
| ■ compliment and complement | ■ capitol and capital |
- Mixing up "that" and "which"
 - Alot (The correct spelling is "a lot")
 - "The reason is because" (should be "The reason is that")

Resources

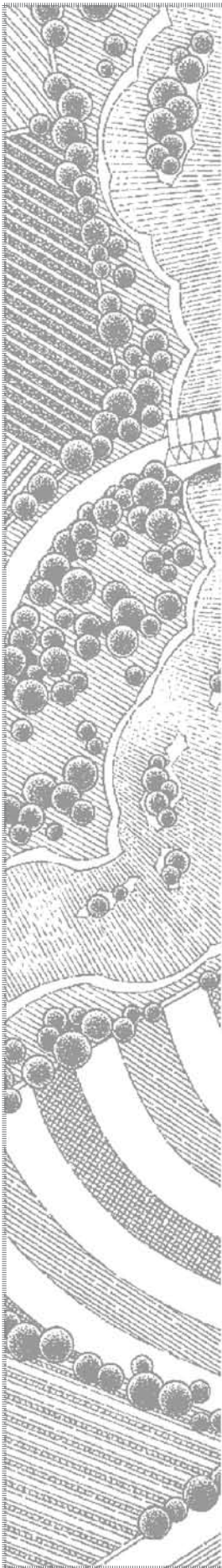
There are a number of internet sites to help you avoid common mistakes and improve your writing. We have included two that have been in existence for several years and that have proven reliable and accurate.

Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>

Capital Community College Guide to Grammar and Writing

<http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar>



Making Presentations and Speeches

A recent survey found that Americans are more afraid of public speaking than snakes, heights, or death itself. Nevertheless, it is a skill that many people must develop to effectively carry out their jobs. Whether you are expected to make a presentation on a loudspeaker during the market or state your case to the local board of supervisors, public speaking skills will enable you to confidently represent your organization.



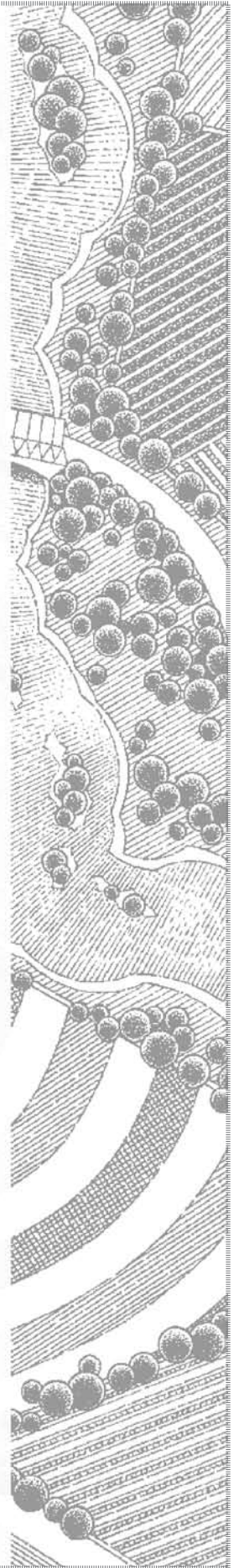
The best way to improve your speaking ability is to practice. If public speaking is difficult for you, find a way to practice in a safe environment. A community college or continuing education course or participation in an organization like Toastmasters offer both expert guidance and opportunities to practice. Another way to learn public-speaking skills is to observe experienced speakers. How do they present information? What language do they use? How do they hold their bodies? Watch their techniques to see what works for you and what fails to hold your attention.

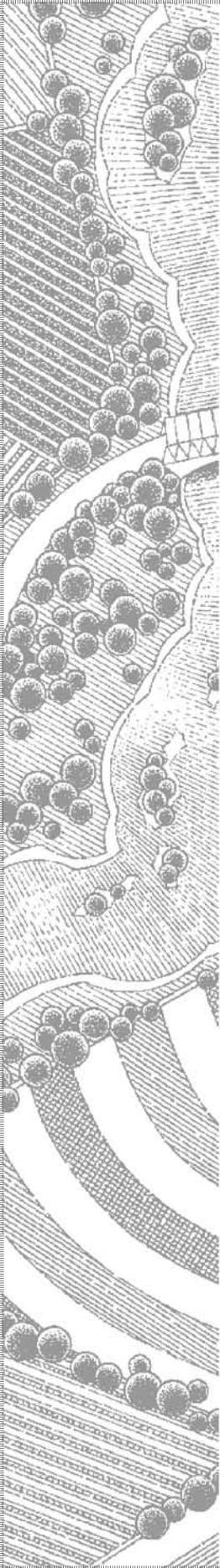
Preparing a Presentation

A good presentation will appear effortless to the audience, but it may have taken weeks to develop. Depending on the formality and content of your presentation, you may need to begin thinking about what you are going to say and the manner in which you will present the information well in advance of your actual talk. Obviously, if you are going to announce the winner of a raffle at the market on Saturday, you do not need to practice for weeks ahead of time. But if you are presenting a new proposal for an expansion of the existing market to the local officials, you may want to develop both an oral presentation and accompanying slide show.

The best way to ensure that you do a good job with a presentation is to create an outline, fill in necessary details and examples, and practice it several times. Stand in front of a mirror or ask a trusted friend to listen. You should be able to go through the entire speech without stopping to change wording or reorganize your thoughts. While it may feel embarrassing and take several tries to get it right, you will be glad you did when you can comfortably express yourself in front of a group.

Before you begin to write your talk, think about who the audience will be. Is it the mayor and city staff or a nonprofit organization? The intended audience will determine the language you use, the formality of your speech, and the way you present yourself. It also is important to consider whether the audience will be





friendly or skeptical. If you expect to encounter opposition, you need a plan to address it; for example, you can anticipate and addressing their arguments against your ideas.

Other things to consider are the length of time for your presentation and the type of room or environment in which you will speak. Your talk will be organized differently if you have three minutes to talk on the sidewalk near a busy intersection or one hour in a board room with an overhead projector. Make sure you know as many of these details as possible ahead of time.

Organizing Your Presentation

Once you know the specifics about the talk you will give, organize the actual material you are going to present. No matter how good your ideas are, they can be lost if your presentation is not well organized. In general, a speech is organized into the following components:

Introduction – Introduce your subject and why you are talking about it. Also, give an overview of what you will be covering. If you use an accompanying slide presentation, this is akin to a table of contents. For instance: “I will be speaking today about our plan to expand the Main Street Farmers Market. I will present our new blueprints, business plan, and financial projections.” Your audience wants to know what to expect. Providing this road map at the beginning of your talk will clue them in to where you are going and prepare them to receive the information. Make sure that your presentation actually follows your outline; use this introduction as a way to check on the contents of the presentation as you prepare it and to stay on track.

Main Points – To make your presentation clear for the audience, organize your material into several main points. Many presentations are organized around a specific number of primary ideas or suggestions, such as “ten tips for successful marketing” or “five ideas to help you overcome your fear of public speaking.” This type of list presentation is useful for creating a framework for your talk. You can also arrange speeches by issues or subject areas, such as business skills, marketing skills, and community relations. Each of these subjects would be given separate attention within your speech. This format allows you to cover more complex subject areas.

Conclusion – It is very important to have a good, solid conclusion to your speech that wraps up and briefly reviews the points you just made. You may want to start this part of your speech with something like “in conclusion” or “finally” so that your audience knows the talk is about to end. It also gives your audience a chance to hear the main points again and to remember them.

A note about your audience: keep in mind when you prepare your speech that the attention of your audience will be its strongest during the first and last couple of minutes of your talk. The rest of the time, people to whom you are speaking will fluctuate between attentive listening and day dreaming. It is therefore desirable to make the beginning and end of your speech strong enough and complete enough to allow them to take away the basics of your message during those few minutes.

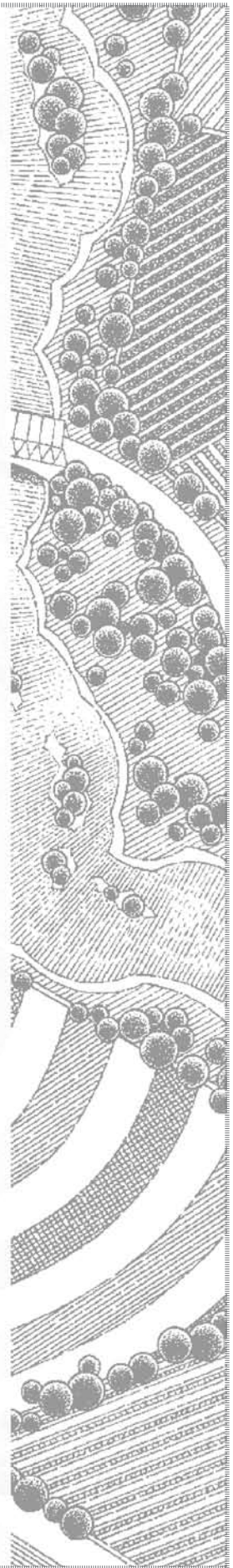
Keeping Your Audience's Attention and Getting Your Message Across

The quickest way to lose someone's attention is to read or speak in a monotone. On the other hand, if you speak in a relaxed conversational tone, others are more likely to take interest. The tone of your voice and the type of language that you choose will have a big impact on the willingness of your audience to listen. Here are some tips for creating an interesting and engaging presentation:

- **Use simple language.** Do not use jargon unless the situation specifically calls for it and you are certain that your audience will understand it. Avoid acronyms (e.g., GMO for genetically modified organisms) for the same reason.
- **Develop your topic.** Instead of simply reading a bulleted list of items, give a few examples to illustrate your point. Nothing drives information home faster than a real-life story about what you are saying.
- **Be specific.** Avoid generalizations that can be misinterpreted. In addition to using examples, clarify your points.
- **Know your topic.** If you seem unsure of the material you are presenting, other people will question your authority. Do your research and be ready to back up your points.
- **Use humor occasionally.** This does not mean throwing in off-color jokes. Instead, highlight something that is funny or ironic in a way that helps relax and engage your audience.

How you present yourself is as important as the material you present. From the moment you stand up in front of others to speak, you are developing a rapport with your audience.

- **Make eye contact.** If you look people in the eye, they will be more likely to focus their attention on you. If you are looking at someone while you speak, then they feel like you are talking directly to them. Do not, however, focus on just one or two people. Your eyes should move around the room; try to look at almost everyone at some point during the talk.



- **Use an engaged tone of voice.** Use your voice to highlight important points, express humor, and transition between sections of your talk. If you are not interested in what you are saying, others will not be either.
- **Relax . . . or try to.** If you present yourself in a nervous fashion, say “um” often, or drop your papers on the floor, your body language will distract from the message you are delivering. Even if you are shaking inside, practice developing a relaxed stance while speaking in front of others.

Visual Aids

Visual aids such as slides, flip charts, photos, and handouts can graphically convey information more meaningfully than words alone. If you choose to use these tools, make sure that the material they contain is organized, clear, and important. Fuzzy slides or sloppy overheads will only distract your audience. Also, test any equipment you want to use before the talk begins. How many presentations have you seen where the slide projector broke down and fifteen minutes was wasted trying to get it fixed? This type of mistake will turn many of your listeners off and cut down on the time you have to present your ideas.

Conclusion

In this chapter you have learned about the importance of good writing and public speaking and presentation skills. Developing these skills is a worthwhile investment of time, energy, and money because they can pay off in the image you project and the credibility you earn. Even more important, though, in terms of sheer volume and amount of time, is interpersonal communication. The next chapter will address listening, nonverbal, and speaking skills to improve your communications with all those involved in the market.

