

13.2: Strategies for Success

Learning Objectives

1. Identify strategies to highlight ways to approach the preparation and presentation of your message.

Given the diverse nature of audiences, the complexity of the communication process, and the countless options and choices to make when preparing your speech, you may feel overwhelmed. One effective way to address this is to focus on ways to reach, interact, or stimulate your audience. Humans share many of the same basic needs, and meeting those needs provides various strategies for action.

Charles Kostelnick and David Roberts outline several cognate strategies, or ways of framing, expressing, and representing a message to an audience, in *Designing Visual Language: Strategies for Professional Communicators* (Kostelnick C. and Roberts, D., 1998). The word “cognate” refers to knowledge, and these strategies are techniques to impart knowledge to your audience. Kostelnick and Roberts’s strategies are cross-disciplinary in that they can be applied to writing, graphic design, and verbal communication. They help the writer, designer, or speaker answer questions like “Does the audience understand how I’m arranging my information?” “Am I emphasizing my key points effectively?” and “How does my expression and representation of information contribute to a relationship with the audience?” They can serve you to better anticipate and meet your audience’s basic needs.

Aristotle outlined three main forms of rhetorical proof: ethos, logos, and pathos. Ethos involves the speaker’s character and expertise. Logos is the logic of the speaker’s presentation—something that will be greatly enhanced by a good organizational plan. Aristotle discussed pathos as the use of emotion as a persuasive element in the speech (Wisse, J., 1998), or “the arousing of emotions in the audience.” We don’t always make decisions based on clear thinking. Sometimes we are moved by words, by a scene in a movie, or by other mediated forms of communication. As the speaker, you may create a message by selecting some aspects and rejecting others. A close-up picture of a child starving to death can capture attention and arouse emotions. If you use pathos in a strategic way, you are following Aristotle’s notion of rhetorical proof as the available means of persuasion. If logic and expertise don’t move the audience, a tragic picture may do so.

The cognate strategies are in many ways expressions of these three elements, but by focusing on individual characteristics, can work towards being more effective in their preparation and presentation. Many of these strategies build on basic ideas of communication, such as verbal and nonverbal delivery. By keeping that in mind, you’ll be more likely to see the connections and help yourself organize your presentation effectively.

Here we adapt and extend Kostelnick and Roberts’ strategies in order to highlight ways to approach the preparation and presentation of your message. Across the cognate strategies, we can see Aristotle’s rhetorical elements through a range of strategies to communicate better with our audience. There is a degree of overlap, and many of the strategies draw on related elements, but by examining each strategy as a technique for engaging your audience, you can better craft your message to meet their expectations.

Tone

From the choice of your words, to the choice of your dress, you contribute to the tone of the speech. Tone, or the general manner of expression of the message, will contribute to the context of the presentation. First, consider your voice. Is it relaxed, or shaky and nervous? Your voice is like a musical instrument that, when played expressively, fulfills a central role in your ability to communicate your message to your audience. Next consider how your tone is expressed through your body language. Are your arms straight down at your sides, or crossed in front of you, or are they moving in a natural flow to the rhythm and cadence of your speech? Your dress, your use of space, and the degree to which you are comfortable with yourself will all play a part in the expression of your message.

Emphasis

If everyone speaks at the same time, it’s hard for anyone to listen. In the same way, if all your points are equally presented, it can be hard to distinguish one from another, or to focus on the points that are most important. As the speaker, you need to consider how you place emphasis—stress, importance, or prominence—on some aspects of your speech, and how you lessen the impact of others. Perhaps you have a visual aid to support your speech in the form of a visually arresting picture. Imagine that you want to present a persuasive speech on preventing skin cancer and you start with a photo of two people wearing very little clothing. While the image may capture attention, clearly placing emphasis on skin, it may prove to be more of a distraction than an addition.

Emphasis as a cognate strategy asks you to consider relevance, and the degree to which your focal point of attention contributes to or detracts from your speech. You will need to consider how you link ideas through transitions, how you repeat and rephrase, and how you place your points in hierarchical order to address the strategy of emphasis in your presentation.

Engagement

Before you start thinking about weddings, consider what key element is necessary for one to occur? If you guessed a relationship you were correct. Just as a couple forms an interpersonal relationship, the speaker forms a relationship with the audience members. Eye contact can be an engaging aspect of this strategy, and can help you form a connection—an engagement—with individual audience members. Looking at the floor or ceiling may not display interest to the audience. Engagement strategies develop the relationship with the audience, and you will need to consider how your words, visuals, and other relevant elements of your speech help this relationship grow.

Clarity

As a speaker, you may have excellent ideas to present, but if they are not made clear to the audience, your speech will be a failure. “Clarity strategies help the receiver (audience) to decode the message, to understand it quickly and completely, and when necessary, to react without ambivalence” (Kostelnick, C. and Roberts, D., 1998). Your word choices, how you say them, and in what order all relate to clarity. If you use euphemisms, or indirect expressions, to communicate a delicate idea, your audience may not follow you. If you use a story, or an arresting image, and fail to connect it clearly to your main point or idea, your audience will also fail to see the connection. Depending on the rhetorical situation, the use of jargon may clarify your message or confuse your audience. You’ll also need to consider the visual elements of your presentation and how they clarify your information. Is the font sufficiently large on your PowerPoint slide to be read in the back of the room? Is your slide so packed with words that they key ideas are lost in a noise of text? Will it be clear to your listeners how your pictures, motion clips, or audio files relate to topic?

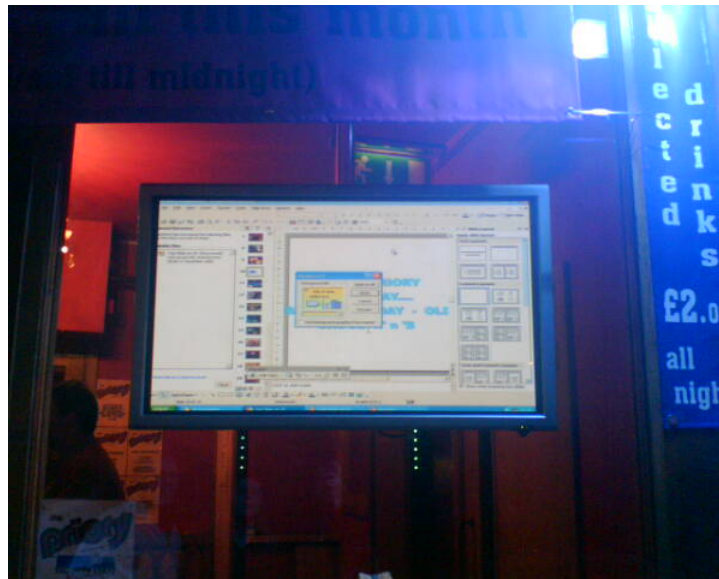


Figure 13.2.2: Dense graphics that are not legible from the back of the room can sabotage your presentation. Simon Pearson – Powerpoint lessons at The Priory – CC BY-ND 2.0.

Conciseness

Being clear is part of being concise. Conciseness refers to being brief and direct in the visual and verbal delivery of your message, and avoiding unnecessary intricacy. It involves using as many words as necessary to get your message across, and no more. If you only have five to seven minutes, how will you budget your time? Being economical with your time is a pragmatic approach to insuring that your attention, and the attention of your audience, is focused on the point at hand.

Arrangement

As the speaker, you will gather and present information in some form. How that form follows the function of communicating your message involves strategically grouping information. “Arrangement means order, the organization of visual (and verbal) elements

(Kostelnick, C. and Roberts, D., 1998) “in ways that allow the audience to correctly interpret the structure, hierarchy, and relationships among points of focus in your presentation. We will discuss the importance of hierarchy, and which point comes first and last, as we explore arguments and their impact on the perception of your message.

Credibility

Here we can clearly see Aristotle’s ethos—character and expertise. You will naturally develop a relationship with your audience, and the need to make trust an element is key to that development. The word “credibility” comes from the word “credence,” or belief. Credibility involves your qualities, capabilities, or power to elicit from the audience belief in your character. Cultivating a sense of your character and credibility may involve displaying your sense of humor, your ability to laugh at yourself, your academic or profession-specific credentials, or your personal insight into the topic you are discussing.

For example, if you are going to present a persuasive speech on the dangers of drinking and driving, and start with a short story about how you helped implement a “designated driver” program, the audience will understand your relationship to the message, and form a positive perception of your credibility. If you are going to persuade the audience to give blood, practice safe sex, or get an HIV test, your credibility on the subject may come from your studies in the medical or public health field, from having volunteered at a blood drive, or perhaps from having had a loved one who needed a blood transfusion. Consider persuasive strategies that will appeal to your audience, build trust, and convey your understanding of the rhetorical situation.

Expectation

Your audience, as we’ve addressed previously, will have inherent expectations of themselves and of you depending on the rhetorical situation. Expectations involve the often unstated, eager anticipation of the norms, roles and outcomes of the speaker and the speech. If you are giving an after-dinner speech at a meeting where the audience members will have had plenty to eat and drink immediately before you get up to speak, you know that your audience’s attention may be influenced by their state of mind. The “after-dinner speech” often incorporates humor for this very reason, and the anticipation that you will be positive, lighthearted and funny is implicit in the rhetorical situation. If, on the other hand, you are going to address a high school assembly on the importance of graduating from high school and pursuing a college education, you may also be motivational, funny, and lighthearted, but there will be an expectation that you will also discuss some serious issues as a part of your speech.

Reference

No one person knows everything all the time at any given moment, and no two people have experienced life in the same way. For this reason, use references carefully. Reference involves attention to the source and way you present your information. If you are a licensed pilot and want to inform your audience about the mistaken belief that flying is more dangerous than driving, your credibility will play a role. You might also say “according to the Federal Aviation Administration” as you cite mortality statistics associated with aviation accidents in a given year. The audience won’t expect you to personally gather statistics and publish a study, but they will expect you to state where you got your information. If you are talking to a group of children who have never flown before, and lack a frame of reference to the experience of flying, you will need to consider how to reference key ideas within their scope of experience.

A good way to visualize this is as a frame, where some information you display to the audience is within the frame, and other information (that you do not display) lies outside the frame. You focus the information to improve clarity and conciseness, and the audience will want to know why the information you chose is included and where you got it. That same frame may also be related to experience, and your choice of terms, order or reliance on visual aids to communicate ideas. If you are giving a speech on harvesting crops on an incline, and your audience is made up of rural Bolivians who farm manually, talking about a combine may not be as effective as showing one in action in order to establish a frame of reference.

- **References**

Kostelnick, C., & Roberts, D. (1998). *Designing visual language: Strategies for professional communicators*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Wisse, J. (1989). *Ethos and pathos: From Aristotle to Cicero*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Adolph M. Hakkert.

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