

Seven features of a good talk or paper

Focus, structure, balance, precision, clarity, conciseness and illustration: all deserve attention.

1. **Focus.** We need a topic or question, or an inter-related pair or small set of them, as our focus, and must make clear to ourselves and our hearers what it is, so that we don't drift and seldom digress, even within the broader subject (whatever that may be) of which our topic or question, or pair or set, is a part.
2. **Structure.** To be clear what the sections of your talk or paper are to be and to make that structure clear to your audience is a great help in communication. Three is the classic number (see 'Balance'), but that is open to variation.
3. **Balance.** Any fool can exaggerate, one might say; it takes thought and care to do justice to two or more sides of a matter (for example, to attend properly to the need both for conservation and for change). Often it is sensible to consider two contrasting aspects or views of a matter and then propose a way to do justice to each in general or in a particular case.
4. **Precision.** Put in the time and effort (often by making changes) to determine and write exactly what it is that you want to say, especially at crucial points, for example in definitions or conclusions. Consider this tribute by one Oxford professor of philosophy to another, H.A.Prichard to T.H.Green: "the more you study any particular sentence, the more you become convinced that every word of it has been weighed, and that, whether or not it be true, it expresses exactly what he meant to say". A paper, by definition, should be written out in full; do the same for much or all of a talk, whether it be of 120 words or of 6000. (From one minute to fifty, be clear about the length you intend.)
5. **Clarity.** When you have secured precision, modify your presentation so that it can be readily heard and understood by the particular audience on that particular occasion. Follow Sir Ernest Gowers's maxim whenever you can: "Use few, familiar and precise words." Learn by practice to engage and keep your audience's attention whether you are reading from a text or not: a neglected art.
6. **Conciseness.** Sentences can often be shortened, and sometimes it helps to divide them (or to find a neat way of combining them). Learn to use pronouns well. Rid your work of any kind of "padding".
7. **Illustration.** Suppose that I want to make the point that 'reason' does not mean the same as 'cause'. I should offer an example, and, as often, can proceed by way of it. A recent article by a journalist began with a sentence needing more than one improvement: "I'm an atheist for the same reason that most believers are members of their particular faith: I was born into a family of unbelievers." Much more precise (and seven words shorter) is "I'm an atheist from the same cause that applies to most believers: the orientation of one's elders." So we may illustrate also that requirement characteristically pressed since Socrates by good philosophy upon the unwary participant: great and beneficial care in using, as in trying to explain, "tricky" words.

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