

How-To

Critique Your Personal Style

Surveys show that public speaking is the number one fear in America. Efforts to improve oral presentations are as least as old as this 95-year-old quotation:

“Be perfectly natural. Get into touch with your hearers.

Stand or sit among them, as it were, and talk with them; do not place a cold distance between yourself and them, and then speak at them . . . make gestures . . . where they are required. A few, well-placed and suited to the thought, are better than many given at random . . . express joy, sorrow, wonderment, fear, merriment, hope, despair, anger . . . according as these are conveyed in language. . . .” — from “The Peerless Reciter,” 1894



by **Joyce Newman**

That's still good advice in 1989. These days, the best way to analyze your speaking style is to rehearse your presentation using a video camera. If you don't have access to one, rehearse in front of a full-length mirror using a tape recorder. Then take a good hard look at yourself, as if you were in the audience.

Stepping outside yourself to study your performance isn't easy. In this situation, most people have a difficult time finding something they like about themselves. Instead, they focus on their physical attributes.

A good way to be more objective — and positive — is to make a list of five things you like about yourself (e.g., being outgoing, energetic, knowledgeable). Make this list before your rehearsal. Then, when analyzing your tape or looking at yourself in the mirror, look first for these positive qualities.

Remember, you will be much harder on yourself than anyone else. By focusing on the positive, you will give yourself permission to say, “I'm OK.” Feeling good about yourself will do a lot to enhance your overall performance while you work toward eliminating any characteristics that may distract from your message.

Here are points to look for when critiquing your personal style. Did you have . . .

A Strong Opening — Did your opening statement grab the audience's attention? A rhetorical question, an anecdote, a summary of the facts or a quotation related to your theme is an effective way to begin.

Direct Eye Contact — Did you give the impression that you were looking at everyone? To make direct eye contact, talk to one person until you complete a point. Then move on to look at another person. “Visit” with each one from 10 to 20 seconds. Be sure to “work the room” so that everyone in the audience feels included.

Vocal Energy and Variety — Did you speak in short conversational sentences? Use punctuation marks as natural breathing points. Highlight key words in your notes as a reminder to emphasize them.

Gestures and Facial Expression — Did your hand and body movements add to your message rather than distract the audience? Between gestures, remember to rest your hands at your sides or lightly on the lectern. Use your hands and arms to communicate ideas such as size, direction, emphasis and number. Keep your hands out of your pockets and away from your face and hair. Your facial expressions should reflect the tone of your message. Smile when appropriate; smiling constantly will make you look insincere.

Fluency — Did your words flow smoothly? Have you avoided non-words such as “um,” “uh” or “you know”? Substitute pauses for the non-words. Silence as a bridge between different ideas is OK. It gives your audience a chance to catch up with you and “digest” what you've said.

Appropriate Language — Have you avoided jargon, acronyms, “inside” jokes and off-color language?

Visuals — Did you paint word pictures to help the audience visualize and retain your message? Were your visual aids large enough for everyone to see and simple enough to be understood?

Knowledge of Audience — Have you realistically analyzed the audience as to why they should be interested in what you have to say? Have you addressed their needs rather than telling them only what you want them to hear? Did you stay within the time limit and within the audience's attention span?

Organization — Were your remarks well organized with a beginning, middle and end? Did you use conversational linking phrases to move from one section to the next? Were your remarks in chronological, historical or logical sequence?

Strong Closing — Have you provided a summary of the important points? Have you challenged the audience to take an action? Did you indicate your intention to take an action? Did you end on a positive note?

Use these tips to work on your speaking style. Be positive. Remember, it takes time and practice to develop good public speaking skills. Whether you are giving a speech, teaching a workshop, making a new business presentation to a client group or a presentation to your peers in the office, these tips will pay off.