

Structure of Oral Presentation

Organization is the most essential aspect of oral presentation. It clarifies your argument and helps the audience remember what you say. It also helps you, the speaker, easily manage the delivery of your presentation so that you can gracefully adjust to unforeseen developments.

Below is a functional description of each part of one organizational structure. This structure is not intended as a template, but rather is an explanation of how each element of one thoughtful design helps a speaker communicate ideas to an audience. There is an infinite number of ways to arrange ideas, and you are encouraged to experiment with structures until you find a clear and compelling way to organize your presentation.

Introduction

A good introduction focuses the attention of the audience on the speaker, and outlines the thesis and support so that listening for each part of the speech is easy for the audience.

Hook: Your first sentences are your chance to capture the audience for the entire presentation. Start your presentation with a *short* anecdote, quotation, fact or any other device that is topical and will interest your audience. If you're working on a long project, it's wise to keep your eye out for a fun piece of information to use as your hook.

State the Significance of Your Topic: Inspire the interest of your audience by telling them why your subject matter is of significance to *them*.

Thesis: The thesis is the foundation of the organizational structure. It is the central idea or argument of the presentation. It must be clear or it will be difficult for you to organize your presentation and for your audience to understand it. A thesis should be concise (preferably one sentence) and precise (it alone should communicate the presentation topic). Avoid mixing the thesis with other parts of the introduction.

Your thesis indicates what sort of presentation you will make. An **analytical**, or persuasive thesis is a contention about a body of information that could spark disagreement and needs supporting evidence. An **informative** thesis tells the audience that you will present a body of information on a topic and usually does not advance an argument. Note that analytical presentations are informative as well—you have to present information if you are going to analyze it.

Preview: The preview maps the main points or arguments that you will present in support of your thesis. A helpful trick is to use “buzz words,” which label each point and are easy for the audience to remember. You can use your buzz words again in the topic sentence of each point to alert your audience when you begin a new point.

Body

The body of your speech presents claims and evidence *in support of your thesis*. It should be broken into several central points, each of which may have sub-points. Determine how to arrange your points based on how you believe your argument or information is best conceptualized. In addition to structuring the body, structure each point internally. Basic structural suggestions for points follow:

Topic Sentence: The topic sentence introduces the major arguments or claims supporting the thesis in an analytical speech and the topic of each point in an informative speech. Unfortunately you don't have the opportunity to highlight your topic sentence visually with an indented line as you would if you were starting a paragraph, but you can mark it orally by including the buzz words you created in the preview or by signposting (see page 3 for an discussion of signposting). Hint: most people are inclined to put the topic sentence at the end of a point so most speakers must be vigilant about this habit.

Preview: Preview sub-points if you have them.

Present Evidence: Present (and cite!) information from external sources.

Clarify Evidence: Provide an explanation of your evidence so that the audience can understand and evaluate it. When presenting a graph, explain what each axis represents and highlight important conclusions or relationships in the data.

Warrant: It isn't always clear to the audience that your evidence can legitimately support your claim. Warrants clarify and justify your claim by providing a rationale for why conclusions made from your evidence are valid. For example, to make the *claim*, "CEO Anita is guilty of defrauding investors" based on *evidence*, "Anita accounted for significant company losses in a later accounting period than the one in which they were first apparent," you need the *warrant*, "CEO's who account for losses in a period later than the period in which they were first apparent are guilty of fraud." Note that the warrant, like the claim, is not absolute and could be changed.

Transition: Transitions help you balance the need to break your presentation into sections with the need to convey the interdependent nature of your ideas. Signal a transition between points by explaining how one point relates to the next.

Conclusion

Review: Remind your audience of the arguments you made in support of your thesis by restating them, again using the buzzwords of your preview and topic sentences.

Restate Your Thesis: Follow the review with a restatement of your thesis so that the audience is left with a clear understanding of how your evidence supports your thesis.

Conclusion: Your conclusion should give the audience a sense of closure. You might return to your "hook," pose questions for further discussion, or suggest future inquiries that would further illuminate the topic.

More Helpful Organizational Devices:

Signposts: Signposts explicitly highlight the presentation's organization and major ideas for the audience by using marking words (*first, next, last, in sum, therefore* etc.) or entire phrases (*The most important thing to understand about X is...*).

Internal Summaries: Highlight and clarify the most important conclusions of complex sections of your presentation by summarizing them at the end of the section.

Consistent Vocabulary: Use the same word each time you refer to a particular concept. If you use synonymous words or phrases when referring to the same concept, some members of the audience may think you are introducing a new and different concept. Likewise, highlight subtle differences between concepts by using different vocabulary when speaking about them. "Buzz words," above under "preview," and "repetition," discussed below, are variations on this device.

Repetition: In this design the preview and review echo each other and the topic sentences and transitions repeat parts of the preview throughout the presentation. This repetition allows people to learn how your presentation, and your ideas, are structured and helps them remember what you said. Repetition is emphasized more in speech than in writing because in speech the audience has little ability to control the speed of the presentation to match their rate of comprehension, and they can not back-loop (meaning re-read sections).

Relate Each Point Back to Your Thesis: A common mistake is to state the thesis at the beginning and then proceed without making its presence clear in the rest of the presentation. Individuals in the audience may or may not be able to maintain your thesis in memory and discern how your presentation is supporting it. If you restate your thesis periodically by explaining how each point supports the thesis, your presentation will have unity and people will understand how your ideas work together to support your thesis. (You may have noticed that this device is a variant of repetition).

Rate: If you think parts of your presentation will be difficult for your audience to assimilate, you should consider slowing the rate of your delivery or even pausing to let information sink in before you continue. You should also be aware of signals of confusion from the audience and should stop to clarify sections of your presentation where necessary. In most situations, it is appropriate to ask the audience whether they need clarification when you are not sure whether they understand a concept.

Primacy and Recency: Audiences most easily remember what they hear first and last. You might take advantage of this effect by putting your best points or sub-points first or last. However, it is most important that you build your argument in a logical and sensible way, so you will often find that this organizational consideration is irrelevant.