As you sit near the front of the darkened room and wait for the moderator to introduce your paper, perhaps you flip through your PowerPoint slides (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA) one more time or mentally review the main points of your presentation. No matter how you prepare for a talk, your goal is the same as that of any other speaker: to capture the audience’s attention and present the results of your research clearly, concisely, and within the allotted time. This article discusses the importance of mastering public speaking and provides tips for developing this crucial skill.

FIND YOUR VOICE

Not everyone is a natural-born speaker, but anyone can hone his or her skills with a little practice. Since 1961, Frederick Kapetansky, MD, has helped residents at The Ohio State University in Columbus become better public speakers. “When doctors leave our program and go into the community, they are expected to participate in public forums,” said Dr. Kapetansky in an interview with *Glaucoma Today*. “Unfortunately, public speaking is not a traditional part of the medical school curriculum, so doctors are often left to learn by trial and error.”

For several years, Dr. Kapetansky and John Cohen, MD, taught the course “Public Speaking for Physicians” during the AAO Annual Meeting. Dr. Kapetansky began offering the class to ophthalmic residents at The Ohio State University at the request of the residency director. “Every June, the ophthalmic residents present their research to the faculty,” Dr. Kapetansky said. “It became apparent to us that they needed to improve their public speaking skills.” Over the years, Dr. Kapetansky has put together a curriculum that covers the basics of public speaking. The process begins, he said, by tailoring your presentation to your audience.

CONSIDER THE SETTING

Depending on the event, you may choose to read your speech or work from an outline. Reading a prepared speech might be appropriate for formal occasions, but it will only be successful if you follow some basic rules. Dr. Kapetansky recommends using conversational language, speaking in short sentences, varying the tone and inflection of your voice, and looking at the audience as much as possible.

“Most people are comfortable with one-on-one interactions,” said Dr. Kapetansky. “I tell my residents that speaking to large groups is very similar to talking with their friends. I recommend they choose an individual from the audience and talk to him or her directly. As they move their gaze from person to person, they will become less nervous, and before they know it, they are speaking effectively to a large group.”

Extemporaneous presentations, noted Dr. Kapetansky, tend to be less structured and provide more opportunities for the speaker to connect with the audience. “Using an outline instead of a written speech helps me keep an eye on my audience and allows me to adapt if I am interrupted or have a problem with my slides,” he stated. “I also have more freedom to move and make gestures than I would if I were reading a speech. This strategy helps me keep the audience alert and release nervous energy that might interfere with my message.”

CHOOSE APPROPRIATE VISUAL AIDS

The introduction of software programs such as PowerPoint and Apple Keynote (Apple, Inc., Cupertino, CA) has changed how speakers prepare for public presentations. Doctors no longer spend an inordinate amount of time transferring text and clinical photographs to slides, loading the slides into a carousel, and carrying the carousel to professional meetings. Instead, they prepare their visual aids with little effort and, if need be, edit their slides at the last minute.

With this new freedom, however, comes a temptation to create more slides than necessary. “You should only show two slides per minute,” said Dr. Kapetansky. “If you bring 40 slides for a 15-minute talk, you may feel obligated to show all of them and end up rushing through your presentation.”
You should also avoid leaving a slide up for more than 1 minute, added Dr. Kapetansky, because you risk losing the audience’s attention. “These guidelines not only help you to choose visual aids that enhance your presentation but also to plan your talk to fit the allotted time,” he said.

**CHANNEL NERVOUS ENERGY**

According to Dr. Kapetansky, one of the most common mistakes made by speakers behind the podium is showing that they are nervous. “A survey quoted in the Book of Lists found that people are more afraid of speaking in public than they are of snakes, heights, loneliness, and death,” said Dr. Kapetansky. “It is natural to be nervous before a speech, but the trick is to use that tension to make your talk more exciting.”

In addition to teaching his residents basic stress-reducing techniques (deep breathing, relaxing exercises), Dr. Kapetansky advises his students to hold onto the lapel of their business suit or some other item of clothing while they are speaking. “For some reason, this strategy makes me feel more comfortable behind the podium and allows me to concentrate on speaking clearly and conveying my enthusiasm for my subject,” he remarked.

**PRACTICE**

No matter how many tips or tricks you try, the only sure-fire way to become a dynamic speaker is to practice. “My colleagues and I always offer to listen to and critique our residents’ research presentations ahead of time,” said Dr. Kapetansky. “We can tell them if they want the audience to see. Laser pointers are great tools but can be distracting if they are used incorrectly.”

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**ADVICE FROM THE EXPERTS**

*Glaucoma Today* asked glaucoma specialists to share their experiences as public speakers.

**M. BRUCE SHIELDS, MD**

I prepare for a presentation in two stages. First, I gather my materials and organize a basic outline anywhere from weeks to months in advance. I do not put the finishing touches on my speech until the last 24 hours before the event, however, because I find I concentrate better if I wait until then to finalize my presentation.

PowerPoint (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA) is a useful tool, because it reduces the amount of time I spend preparing my visual aids. Before this technology was available, the process of creating slides was very cumbersome and involved several steps. Now, I prepare my slides myself, and I can change them right up to the last minute.

I advise aspiring public speakers to keep their presentations simple. Instead of overwhelming the audience with too much information, prepare a list of bullet points you want to emphasize. I find that listing these points on my slides, limiting the content of each slide to 10 lines of text, and following the two-slides-per-minute rule help me stay within the time allotted for my presentation without speaking too quickly or slowly.

I would also advise speakers to be aware of how they use laser pointers. Instead of flashing the light all over the projected slide, hold the pointer steady and use it to indicate exactly what you want the audience to see. Laser pointers are great tools but can be distracting if they are used incorrectly.

**KULDEV SINGH, MD, MPH,**

Effective speakers do not memorize presentations but rather rehearse until they can deliver their talk comfortably without fear of missing an important point. This balance can be struck by practicing a presentation aloud in an empty room several times the day before or on the day of the scheduled event. If I am giving a talk at a large meeting such as the AAO, I may rehearse it two or three times in its entirety, using the same tone of voice and visual aids that I will use on stage. It is sometimes helpful to rehearse the opening and closing comments several additional times. The opening in particular sets the tone for the presentation and, if it goes smoothly, allows the speaker to relax. Instead of concentrating on presenting the talk exactly the same every time, I try to become familiar enough with the material so that several versions of the presentation will convey the same message. This approach reduces the chance that I will be distracted if I miss a word or statement.

Speakers can also remain comfortable during a presentation by preparing a talk that is 10% shorter than its allotted time. This strategy leaves speakers ample time to present all of their points without...
are speaking too quickly or too slowly, if they are not emphasizing, not distract from, the information I am presenting.

As scientists, our job is to make discoveries and share our findings with our colleagues and the public. In my multidisciplinary lab group, everyone from principal investigators to medical students gets an opportunity to present his or her research at professional meetings. During our weekly meeting, my group reviews presentations, sometimes hearing four or five iterations of the same talk before we are satisfied. I think this approach improves our investigators’ ability to convey information and helps them become better public speakers.

JOEL S. SCHUMAN, MD

As a resident and a fellow, I had a series of teachers who actively helped me develop my public speaking skills. My mentors, many of whom were exceptional public speakers, took the time to review the talks I prepared for national and international meetings. Their critical feedback helped me develop a speaking style that was clear, concise, and easy to understand. I learned that a presentation should be simple enough to convey two or three key points but not so simple that the audience becomes bored and starts looking for their iPhones (Apple Inc., Cupertino, CA) and Blackberries (Research in Motion, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada). I try to keep the audience’s attention by coming out from behind the podium and designing slides that emphasize, not distract from, the information I am presenting.

Unfortunately, some residents are too busy to take advantage of this offer. “We can always tell when residents have made an effort, however, because their presentations are well crafted and do justice to the hard work they put into their research.”

To get the most out of practice sessions, Dr. Kapetansky advised, do not try to fix every problem at once: “If your diction needs improvement, work on that aspect of your presentation until you are satisfied. Then, you can address any problems you have with timing or work to eliminate distracting mannerisms.”

STICK THE LANDING

Nothing is more distracting than seeing a blinking red light on the timer before you have finished your presentation. With proper planning and practice, you can avoid this awkward situation. Closing your talk with a clear and concise summary of your main points reinforces your message and rewards your audience for their attention.

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