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November 28, 2003

The Scholarly Lecture: How to Stand and Deliver

By WILLIAM GERMANO

It's conference season again. All over academe, thousands of unsuspecting papers will make their way to the front of the lecture hall, where they will be read badly by scholars to fellow scholars who, slumped and glassy-eyed, will be wondering how late the dry cleaner stays open or whether The Sopranos is on that night.

It's a peculiarity of scholarly life that everyone is expected to be able to deliver a lecture well, but almost no one is trained to do it. Academe resists the idea that the teacher is a performer, but the classroom and lecture hall prove that, like it or not, you need performance skills to get your ideas across.

Once upon a very long time ago, educated people studied rhetoric and oratory. When they spoke, people listened. There are remnants of oratory even in our own time. You may not have liked Mrs. Thatcher, but she knew how to speak. You may not have liked Mr. Clinton, either, but what president has loved public speaking as much as Bill did? Of course, comparing politicians and scholars is a bit unfair. World peace is one thing, but no chief executive has had to hold an audience's attention with a paper on small notes in Haydn or character development in the novels of Jean Rhys.

Most problems that beset academic lectures aren't specific to the scholarly world, but saying that they're common isn't the same as saying that they're easy to ignore. Here are a baker's dozen survival tips for academic speakers:

Remember that people who show up to hear you want to believe that you're smart, interesting, and a good speaker. Whatever you've got to say, say it with conviction. If you don't entirely believe in yourself, try believing in others' belief in you. An academic audience wants its speaker to succeed.

Before you get up to speak, be sure you're well hydrated (you need that for your vocal cords) and have made a stop. Even if your talk is only 20 minutes, you could be seated on a dais for a three-hour panel. It can be an uncomfortable three hours if you're worrying about when you can get to the restroom.

Have water beside the podium, but don't drink unless you have to. If you do, use a glass. Don't swig from a bottle. You may be one of those people who wouldn't dream of crossing a street in Manhattan or Hyde Park without a bottle of spring water in your backpack (you never know when the sand dunes might blow up and leave you stranded), but the podium isn't the place. Bottles, hip flasks, and Slurpee cups look unprofessional.

Technology is a tool, but a tool is not a friend and is often a rival. Unlike your audience, machines don't wish you well. Use as few gizmos as possible, and then check everything to be sure everything's in working order. Don't try out a complex set of visuals for the first time when giving an important lecture. Consider, too, that some great lecturers don't want any visuals at all,



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By Peter Schmidt

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since those lovely pictures in a darkened room draw attention away from the speaker herself. (By the way, if you're speaking in a room with a blackboard, be sure to erase it clean. If your lecture begins to falter, your audience may focus instead on chalk scribbles and what they can remember of quadratic equations or the Russian patronymics in Dostoyevsky.)

PowerPoint is for sissies. All right, not for sissies, exactly, but it's being done to death. PowerPoint Makes Everything Really Important in a Telegraphic Way. That's Fine in Some Cases, But It Gets Tiring When It Happens Too Much. Besides, PowerPoint is the triumph of the quick "fact" over the art of argumentation. And a lecture is, or should be, a kind of argument. It's more, too -- a chance to observe a voice, a body, a brain, and a personality engaging an audience with similar interests. If you put your bulleted ideas up on slides, your audience will look at the slides, not at you. You'll also be teaching them that What You Have to Say Can Be Summarized in a Few Words. Can it?

A lecture isn't a casual conversation. The larger the audience, the less casual it is. When you get up there, don't rattle through what you've written as if you were on the phone or face to face with an old friend. That's talking. When you're in front of an audience, you're doing something else. It's called public speaking -- not public talking -- for a reason. So speak slowly and clearly. E-nun-ci-ate. And if you can't speak clearly, at least speak slowly.

Look at your audience frequently. Disappear into your page and your audience will wander off, at least mentally. (The bravest will simply get up and walk out.) Remember to smile. If that's hard, try a gentle expression of nonspecific pleasantness from time to time. The audience wants to like you.

Don't hook the air with your fingers to indicate that you're quoting someone. Tell your audience that what follows is a quotation, and then modulate your voice so they know when the passage begins and ends. Master this technique and you'll be able to read quotes without looking like your marionette just fell down.

Don't read aloud subheads or part numbers that may divide up bits of your lecture. This only makes your audience suspicious that the paper is so poorly organized that its structure couldn't possibly be understood otherwise. In most cases, a speaker who announces, "This paper is in six parts" hasn't thought enough about the paper's shape. Your paragraphs should press forward, taking the listener along without your calling out the mileage markers.

The printed page is different. Scholarly prose can often be usefully interrupted, and shaped, by subheadings. But even if you're planning to publish your lecture, skip them when you're delivering the text live. Ditto for epigraphs.

Never, ever, ever interrupt your lecture to say, "I'm going to skip some pages here in the interest of time," or, "In the longer version of this paper, I will explain. ... " Both are discourteous to the people in your audience, who could easily be doing something else with the time spent listening to you. Write your paper to fill the minutes you have been asked to speak. Don't run over. Don't run wildly short. A 20-minute talk is around 10 pages long. It's never 35 pages long.

Don't apologize for your lapses as a speaker, for the paucity of your research, or for the fact that you couldn't get your hair cut that month. As has been said, if you can fake sincerity, you've got it made. When you're giving a paper, you might need to fake a degree of confidence that you don't actually possess at the moment, but you need that appearance of confidence -- and your audience needs it from you, too.

Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. Then stop. Write your lecture well in advance of the event, so that you have time to practice reading it several times. Stand in front of a mirror, time yourself, and listen to your text, word by word. As you read the text over and over it becomes a kind of song that you can now interpret; you find places where you want to speed up, slow down, brighten your voice, stress words, even where you want to steal a glance at your audience.

When your lecture is finally revised and well practiced, declare the text finished. Lots of academic papers become worse during plane trips to the meeting and in hotel rooms the night before the presentation itself. A good night's sleep will help your lecture more than a tumble with Roget's Thesaurus at 4 a.m.

By Karin Fischer

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Prepare yourself in advance for questions. And, speaking of sleep, people who doze through papers are often freshly attentive for the question period. Always keep in readiness something you might want to add as a supplement to your talk: a witty anecdote, a piece of research that didn't get into your paper, or maybe your (prepared) impromptu thoughts on directions for further research. If you're faced with a question you can't answer, answer one you can ("Speaking of that, I'd like to share with you this story, which helps clarify what we're discussing here today.").

Expect that at least one person in the audience will ask something truly strange. Always respond courteously, and don't be afraid to say that you would have to give it more thought before replying.

If you're not the only speaker, listen to the others. Be a good guest. Sit quietly without fidgeting. Take notes if you like, but pay attention, or at least look like you're paying attention. Remember that people in the audience can always see you.

Now you're all set. You'll watch other speakers as they make their mistakes. You, you'll never make them again, or so you tell yourself. Actually, you will make them again, at least from time to time, because we all do.

One more thing -- and you knew I would say this -- get out there, have fun, and try to relax.

William Germano, vice president and publishing director at Routledge, is the author of *Getting It Published: A Guide for Scholars and Anyone Else Serious About Serious Books* (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

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