

TALK CREATION METHODS

Our intent here is to provide a simple, easy-to-use method for creating short talks to small groups. These methods are valid for the preparation of all sorts of verbal presentations.

STEPS IN TALK CREATION

Step 1. Open Brain-storming. Take a whole sheet of paper and divide it quickly into about 32 boxes. Then put brief notes in each of the boxes -- each note referring to something you know on the subject of your talk. Note illustrations, chapters or articles you have read, life stories, speeches you have given before on this subject, key points, related insights, jokes, cartoons, movies, anything that is relevant in any way whatsoever. Do not try to put anything in order yet. Do not worry about overlapping and duplication. Just let your mind gather related material in the manner in which the human mind naturally and powerfully functions.

If you are giving a book report or a talk on a particular chapter of a book, use this same method except restrict your gathering to content you read in that book or chapter. Add to that your impressions and responses to the material and your own life illustrations of it.

Step 2. Organize Your Brain-storming. Look over all the notes you made with this question in mind: what are the four things I want to say to this group on this subject? Then on a second piece of paper draw a chart like this:

I	1	2
	3	4
II	1	2
	3	4
III	1	2
	3	4
IV	1	2
	3	4

Put your four main points in the large boxes at the left. Then in the four smaller boxes adjacent to each larger box, put four sub-points for each of these main points. This is just a rough organization. If you cannot think of four points in each case, leave those spaces blank. Now check back over your brain-storming with this organization in mind. Has everything been included that you want to include? (Everything does not have to be included; in fact, you are deciding at this point what to leave out.) Is there a more interesting way to organize this material? If so, take another sheet of paper and do so.

Step 3. Create Your Dramaturgical Flow. A good talk is not just a list of abstract points. It is a drama that moves emotionally, as well as logically, from one point to the next. What is it you want your audience to hear first? Second? Third? Fourth? Some kind of dramatic flow needs to be worked out for the four large points as well as the the four subpoints under each large point. The decisions about the dramaturgical flow have to do with clarity and with impact. Things must often be said in a certain order for them to build clarity rather than confusion. Also things must be said in a certain order to maximize the impact of what you are saying. In a series of four points there is usually one of the four that is the one you most want to communicate. That point should almost always come fourth or third in the sequence: one - two - three - FOUR; or one - two -

THREE - four. In the latter case the fourth point is a mop-up point that can only be understood after the main point has been heard. Usually, the first point is the most general, overall, subject-defining point. The next point or two before the main point are "set up" points, points you want to say to enable a fuller hearing of the main point.

Here is a simple illustration: Suppose the overall point is: What is Stress? The subpoints placed in one - two - three- FOUR order might be: (1) two kinds of stress, (2) normal stress, (3) caustic stress, (4) How caustic stress makes you sick.

Another aspect of dramatic order is the selection of illustrations, stories, pieces of your own life experience that accurately illustrate the rational points you are attempting to communicate. An illustration, however colorful, that does not in fact illustrate the point you want to make is a waste of time and often confusing. On the other hand, all your important rational points do need illustration, otherwise they just hang there in the air and never touch the ground of living experience.

The content of each talk dictates its own unique drama. The considerations outlined above are simply tools to use in looking for that drama. You may find you have to give the talk a few times before you discover the best dramatic flow. If your talk is a one-shot affair, you will have to guess which dramatic order will have the impact you want.

Impact is increased by factors other than the dramatic order (although the dramatic order is probably the most important). The use of a blackboard or other visual aid can be very important in lecturing. Which picture drawn on the board will help people keep in mind what you are talking about and show the relationship of the various ideas? Your face and body are also visual communication. And the sound of your voice underlines and matches the dramatic flow of the talk. Just keeping in mind that every good talk is a drama will enliven all these factors.

Finally, your drama needs an "on stage" and an "off stage." How are you going to say a few words to get you started? Telling a joke is too crass a beginning for most situations, but you do need something that makes contact with the audience. Sometimes reading a poem on your subject will do it. For most talks, especially short talks, it is sufficient just to say a few well chosen words that awaken interest and say what you are going to talk about.

Your "off stage" signals that you are through. You may reiterate, quickly, the main point you wanted to communicate. You may leave the group with a question for them to think about further. You may move into a question and answer period from which you will eventually have to construct another "off stage." In any case, it is helpful to have a clear plan for how you intend to finish your talk.

Step 4. Your Notes. What written material do you take with you when you give your talk? The answer to this is: whatever works for you. No notes at all. A complete manuscript. Something in between. Most of us do best with simple notes in large easy to read letters. What you see when you look down at your notes might be something like "Tell bear story", or "Read quote on page 10", or a board diagram with some words on it, or simply the name of the next point. The main value of notes is to give you the security you need to place your attention on the group and make living contact with them on the subject you want to communicate.

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10. Whether you do step 9 or not, turn your final chart over and write two things on the back side: (1) In one sentence (or two) say what this whole piece of material is saying. (2) In another sentence (or two) say what you think of it, both positively and negatively. Your response is an important part of the charting process. It is best to focus on your responses at the end of the charting process rather than at the beginning; because if you focus on your responses too soon, you may block yourself from hearing what the author is actually saying and therefore be responding to phantoms of your own creation rather than to the actual author.

This is it. You are done. This rather detailed description of the charting process may make the process seem more overwhelming than it actually is. Some of the above steps may be done very quickly. A few of them may even be done in your head and never make it to the paper. On a particular occasion you may not complete the process all the way to your own summary and response. Incomplete charts are still good study. You may complete the process later -- perhaps in the group study session. Whatever state your chart is in, it is a record of your insights, confusions, questions, and responses. All this is important. Charting is a process. It is the process that is important, not the end product. If the charting process has clarified something for you, then it has been a success.

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