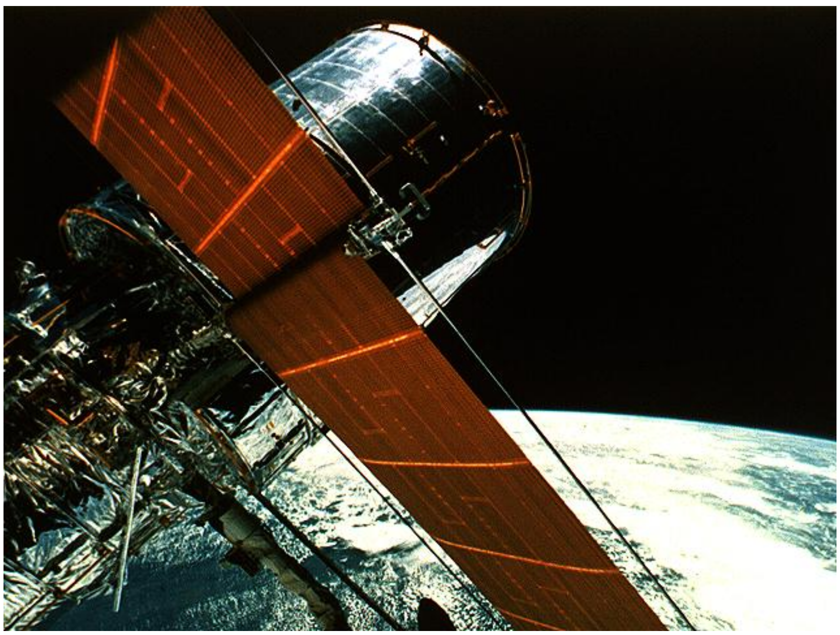
# Communication



# Desktop Guide

**Revision 2**
**by Hal Lowe**
**03/10/04**

# Contents

# Purpose of this Desktop Guide

## To help you communicate better . . .

that’s what this guide is all about.

Getting your message across clearly, whether it’s written, verbal, or physical, is a vital skill that everyone should strive to improve. This guide will give you dozens of tips, examples, and techniques that’ll help you do just that. And like these opening paragraphs, it is written in an easy-to-read informal style.

You’re encouraged to share this *Communication Desktop Guide* with coworkers to help facilitate consistency of implementation concerning meetings, reports, procedures, and other formal communications. Also, share this information with friends, so that they can benefit from the suggestions and examples described throughout this helpful tool.

What you won’t find in this guide are many rules on grammar or sentence structure. There are only a few. (If you do need help with the basics of grammar get *Elements of Style* by Stunk and White or *The Gregg Reference Manual* by William A. Sabin.)

What you will find is solid advice gathered from dozens of experienced writers, speakers, and business consultants that will improve your work and personal life—if you apply it.

# Common Ingredients of Skillful Writing

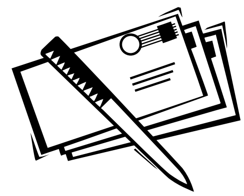
No matter what you plan to write, there are some common ingredients that will help to make the document accomplish its purpose. Like common sense, these common ingredients are easy to include but are too often missing. Here are eight good rules for writing:

1. **Write with the reader in mind.**
2. **Decide your purpose.**
3. **Say exactly what you mean.**
4. **Keep it as short as possible.**
5. **Make your point right away.**
6. **Use a format that guides the reader.**
7. **Write quickly: Build your writing speed. (Take your time when editing.)**
8. **Arouse the reader's interest.**

Yes, writing is one of the basic skills of communication, but no one can truthfully claim to be a finished expert in writing; there's always something else to learn. Read through this section and you'll find a few suggestions that will help you become a better writer. (Also see Part IV: "Tips and Techniques," "How To Make Your Writing More Powerful.")

# How To Write Better Letters

There are two main categories of letters: formal and informal. Let's make this distinction for the sake of clarity: any written message that requires a response, approval, or may need to be retrieved and referred to at a future date is "formal" and those that are of a purely personal nature or that include information, such as a thank you card for a job well done, are "informal."



Now that that's out of the way, at a minimum, here's what should be included in formal letters:

1. **Date the letter is sent.**
2. **Author's name and department or organization.**
3. **Topic description.**
4. **Some form of filing number so the document can be retrieved.**
5. **When an approval is required: Name and title of approver along with a signature and date line.**
6. **A copy should be retained by the author or someone else in the IS Department.**

## How to Prepare a Letter.

You can organize most formal letters into three parts:

1. **Tell why you're writing.**
2. **Give the important facts.**
3. **Describe what you'd like the recipient to do.**

Years ago, business letters were often written in formal language that sounds stiff today. Now, even technical communications are less stuffy and more personal. A letter is a personal communication from one or more human beings to another—not from one faceless department or organization to the next. Effective letters get their messages across by being friendly and helpful.

What about informal letters? When writing to a close friend or your spouse, of course you don't have to follow any rules. Personal discretion takes over. But when you're at work or writing to a casual acquaintance, it's still a good idea to follow basic business etiquette.

# E-mail
## Making It Work For You

*Note: Most of what follows applies to any written business message!*

E-mail is fast, but it's still written communication. The rules of grammar, punctuation, and clarity apply equally to letters sent via e-mail as they do to "hard-copy" letters. So if you send a formal e-mail letter, it should have the minimum requirements that are listed for formal letters in the previous section.

Because it's so fast and easy, e-mail is used for the simplest of messages—there's nothing wrong with that. It's well suited for informal communication, making it fun and even helpful in building relationships—business and otherwise.

It can also cause problems. For example, most e-mail users rarely forget to check the spelling in the messages they compose, but they often neglect to check how their communication will come across to their readers. Even well-meaning individuals write messages that they would never say aloud. To make sure your e-mail doesn't short circuit a business relationship, consider these common-sense guidelines:

**Keep it short.**

Short messages are appropriate for e-mail. Lengthy documents sent unsolicited to numerous recipients can tick some people off. It's better to send a message announcing the availability of the document than the document itself.

**Be consistent.**

Since e-mail is so informal, there is a tendency to write in short, staccato sentences and phrases; to keep the message in all capital letters and generally to ignore the rules of punctuation and spacing. Appearance still counts. Treat your "business" e-mail the same as you would any other professional communication.

**Restrain the urge to “return fire.”**

The immediacy of e-mail may make you feel compelled to compose an immediate response. Don’t be hasty, especially if you are responding to an e-mail message that has made you angry or defensive.

**Be sure to refer to the original message.**

For example, if you receive a meeting notice, mention it in your reply. Say “I will attend the meeting scheduled for . . . ” instead of “I will attend” or “Yes, I’ll be there.”

**Paraphrase when necessary.**

Although e-mail started out as a handy way to send short messages, some people “piggyback” a new message on top of the original messages, often causing confusion. A short message can become a lengthy chain of comment. Rather than perpetuate the chain of messages, paraphrase the comments and original message. A sample paraphrase: “I received a meeting notice for March 10, 1998 at 9 am, but John, Joe, and Mary all said they can’t attend, so please reschedule it.”

**Think about who may read your message.**

You need to consider not only the person the message is for but also anyone else who may read it. Consider the possibility that your message will take an unexpected electronic turn and appear in the wrong mailbox. Do you need to comment about a third party in your message? Is what you need to say negative or could it be construed as such? If so, consider using the phone or meeting the person instead.

**Picture how your message’s receiver will react when reading your message.**

Would you say to this person face to face the same thing you’re writing? Have you inadvertently been sarcastic or judgmental? Is the receiver someone who’s sure to put a negative spin on your message? Remember, if you were conversing orally, you might attempt to temper the bluntness in your message or the exasperation you feel with a grin or a teasing tone. But that’s difficult to do with e-mail (even if you use a smile symbol.) Why chance creating anxiety or even distrust by sending messages that lack human warmth?

**Avoid this type of introduction: “Why didn’t you answer me sooner?”**

Some procrastinators may deserve this kind of blunt reminder. But you’ll do more for the relationship if you open with a face-saving statement. Example: “I wasn’t sure if my message got through yesterday, so here it is again.” Electronic messages that begin with “Why didn’t you?” come across as more directing and authoritative than when you talk on the phone or in person.

**Give the message the "Family Member Test"**

Ask yourself whether you would be embarrassed if an older member of your family read the message you plan to send. Why risk sending something that has innuendoes or remarks that would offend anyone?

**Make sure your message is not too cryptic.**

Have you clearly and concisely said all the reader needs to know? Or have you withheld just enough of the details so you can retain control and force the reader to guess or assume? Keep this in mind: Information control is a communication power play that can backfire very easily.

**Check your messages for grammar idiosyncrasies.**

Have you fallen into the habit of using the ellipsis (. . .) instead of completing your thoughts? Do you get carried away with peculiar punctuation—the e-mail symbols many writers use to take the place of words and to indicate thoughts and feelings? Some symbols may confuse instead of communicate.

## Cut Your Readers a Break

Do you consistently write more than you need? Are you swamping your readers with too many unrelated and unnecessary details? Do you give so much information—important, unimportant, and in no particular order—that your poor reader cannot easily conclude what matters and what doesn't?

Consider the results of an Oregon Business Poll reported in *Oregon Business*. The poll found that 26 percent of those replying spend an hour each day reading and responding to e-mail. And 14 percent spend more than an hour. So you should do everything you can to compose messages that will help your readers save time. Some guidelines:

**Limit your message to one screen for most messages.**

This way receivers won't have to scroll up and down to grasp all that you've said. And use bullets, numbers, underlining, boldface, etc., to highlight key points.

**Do you clutter people's valuable electronic space?**

Do you immediately broadcast every little tidbit you come across? Don't assume that those you communicate with aren't up-to-speed on the latest news and trends. They may well think you're patronizing them by sending common-knowledge information.

**Don't let e-mail become a substitute for in-person or phone conversations.**

Guard against using e-mail to converse with your colleagues in the office next door. Unless the message must absolutely be in writing, try communicating the old-fashioned way—face-to-face. Walk down the hall or to the next building to speak with fellow associates. Invite them to eat lunch with you. Or use the phone. Often, a phone conversation takes a fraction of the time needed to compose a message, send it, and then wait for an answer.

**Keep in mind that readers will respond more willingly to the writer who remembers the human element in communication.**

Do you think to add a personal line or two when you know the reader well? Do you remember to say thank you? The message medium may be cutting edge, but it will never replace the "thank you" and "please." Until some clever person programs a courtesy checker, you'll profit from your own courtesy check. That means you must recognize that the tone of what you write should reflect the kinds of messages you expect to find in your electronic in-basket.

## Keep Track of Your "Official" E-Mail Messages

One final and important point about e-mail: Like a hard-copy letter sent to another department, vendor, or customer, e-mail messages that impact a work schedule, project, or require an official response should be filed.

With these type of "official" messages first ask yourself, "Should this message be sent as e-mail? It may be more appropriate to use a hard-copy letter. If you think it's still fine to send the message electronically, you'll need to keep a formal reference and an approval memo with a manager's signature.

# Writing Useful Procedures & Manuals

*Before writing or revising a procedure, review your company's procedure or writer's guide.*

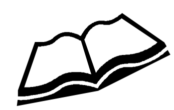
## 1. Remember that procedure and manual writing is instruction writing.

Like a well-written cookbook, a procedure does nothing more than present instructions for completing certain tasks. (The first section or two may describe responsibilities but the main purpose to most procedures is still to instruct.) You will be a more effective writer of procedures if you keep in mind that your mission is to give instruction, not sell, impress, or dazzle your audience with technical knowledge or prose style.

The best way to improve you ability to write clear procedures is to practice giving instructions. If you have trouble giving clear direction to car drivers, for example, you'll probably have trouble explaining how to use CAD/CAM software or install a programmable controller.

You can develop your ability to give clear instructions by writing instructions for non-technical activities. For instance, you might try writing instruction on how to put on a necktie, then see if your 9-year-old child can follow them without help from you.

Writing usable instructions for seemingly simple acts can be quite difficult. But once you master it, you'll find writing instructions for technical activities is not much different—and not much more difficult.



## 2. Be clear and correct.

The technical writer must strive to make procedures clear and easy to follow. Even difficult procedures can be made clear. In his book *How to Dissect: Exploring with Probe and Scalpel* William Berman approaches the complex operation of dissecting a frog in a simple style. He doesn't make the instructions complicated simply because the subject is technical:

*The heart is encased in a thin sac called the pericardial sac. Cut through the thin membrane of this sac with the tip of a very sharp razor. Do not cut the heart itself. Then spread the membrane with forceps to expose the heart.*

Although the procedure is complex, the language is plain, conversational, and human. Reading these direction is like having a patient tutor at your side, helping you step by step to perform the operation described. And that's how all good instructions should be written.

## 3. Be unambiguous.

It is better to be repetitious and perfectly clear than brief and possibly unclear. While it's important to make your document as concise as possible, it's even more important to give instructions that the reader can follow with confidence. Ambiguity in instructional materials makes readers uncomfortable and nervous. They want to be *sure* they're doing things right. If you feel your reader might be confused or uncertain about a particular task or procedure, repeating your instruction two or three times in different ways can help eliminate uncertainty and give the reader confidence.

Not only is a good manual written so that it can be easily understood; ideally, it is written so the instructions cannot be *mis*understood. And that's sometimes a tall order to fill.

## 4. Use warnings.

Instruction writers are responsible for telling their readers what to do, but they must also take responsibility for telling their readers what not to do.

If performing a certain task might accidentally erase a hard-drive file, give the operator an electrical shock, or damage equipment, you should explicitly warn the reader against taking that action.


Give the warnings first, before the action. They should be highlighted by setting them in bold-face type, in all capital letters, in a large typeface, or with some other graphic technique. Putting a box around the warning is a good way to draw attention to it, because people always read text in boxes. Therefore, you can simply insert the warning into your document at the appropriate place, then make it stand out from the rest of the copy by drawing a box around it.

Overusing the box or any other graphic technique makes it less effective. (For example, underlining a word on a page draws attention to it. But if you underline every other word, then no word stands out.)

Secondary warnings—those instructions you want to emphasize because of their importance but that do no warrant the box treatment—can be put in italics, underlined or emphasized using some other graphic convention. You can also reinforce the importance of a warning or instruction by preceding it with the words "make sure," as in these examples:

> Before removing the cover, make sure the power supply to the cabinet is off.
>
> Before closing the cabinet, make sure the screws are tight.

## 5. Use the imperative voice.

Procedures and instruction manuals are written in the imperative mode (expressing a command or request).

Be direct. It's better to write "Connect the communications line" than the weaker, more passive "The communications line should be connected." Effective instructions tell the reader what to do in the simplest, most direct language possible.

Although all of the text for NBU procedures should be written in this straightforward imperative mode, when writing a manual an occasional "human" interruption can break the monotony of dull instructional prose and help wake up sleepy readers. Here's an example from a manual on using PCs:

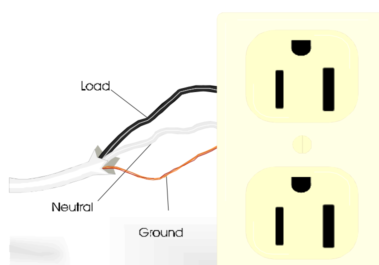
*We need just 10 or the 255 characters in IBM's extended set. Thus, we ought to be able to pack some 25.5 time more numeric information into a byte than is permitted by the ASCII coding scheme. That seems reasonable, doesn't it?*

*In fact, this is exactly what is done in practice. I'm not going to put a glaze in your eyes by explaining the arcane coding schemes used—I'd have to look them up anyway.* (James Kelley, *The IBM PC Guide*, Wayen, PA: Banbury Books)

Although the author could have explained this topic more concisely, and some readers might feel he's going off on a tangent, most will feel it warms up the piece. While not appropriate for every technical document, an occasional shift into this more personal, more human tone can liven up an otherwise dull document.

## 7. Use flowcharts and pictures

A simple picture or diagram can often replace several paragraphs of descriptive text. It's better to show your reader what an icon or valve looks like than it is to describe it with words. Flowcharts are also easier to follow than step-by-step instructions.




## 8. Finally—Give it a test drive.

Although the writer (you), may review a manual or procedure for accuracy, the true test is whether the user can follow it. For this reason, it's a good idea to "test drive" your masterpiece before you have it reproduced or sent for final approval. Make copies of the preliminary draft, give them to a few (at least one) typical users, and get their reactions.

Time, money, and deadlines may limit the extent to which you can pretest the documents, but you should try to get as much feedback from users as possible before you publish the manual or procedure.

Most writers err on the side of doing too little rather than too much testing of instructions.

For instance, software companies test their programs for months before release to catch every last bug, but many think nothing of putting out a manual or procedure that no one but the programmer has read and commented on—which isn't a sensible practice. Although the programmer is the best person to catch technical errors, he or she is too familiar with the program and therefore not likely to spot explanations that aren't detailed or clear enough for the novice user.

Give your procedure or manual to a user. If he or she can follow the instructions—great. It is a success. If not . . . back to the word processor.

## Give plenty of detail in reports.

Can't decide if your audience (such as your boss) is more interested in detail or brevity. The editors of *Executive Productivity* suggest that you make it a habit of giving him or her both. Always begin a lengthy report with a paragraph (no more!) containing an analysis and recommendation, if appropriate. Don't be afraid to oversimplify, as long as you dwell on the nuances in the meat of the report.

A manual is a small book of instructions. Its purpose may vary depending on the subject, yet every manual, if it's a good one, should be easy to use. Too often manuals become hefty storage areas. They are designed to survive an audit rather than provide direction for the people who need them.

If your manual is a complicated ream of instructions rather than a simple straightforward guide book, it's a waste of space. It needs some editing.

### Eight Ways to Simplify a Manual

If you decide to review and simplify a manual (or other instructions), apply these eight points:

1. Eliminate charts, graphs, and tables that are not used to determine a course of action.
2. Cut references to publications that are not available to the people who use the manual.
3. Reduce chapter headings to one word whenever possible.
4. Use common words in subheadings. For example: "What to Do Before You Load the Software" rather than "Pre-installation Policies and Procedures."
5. Gear the manual toward inexperienced employees. One way to do this is by limiting the number of acronyms.
6. Take paragraphs describing tasks and turn them into short lists.
7. Don't use Roman numerals if your manual has several numbered sections.
8. Keep necessary charts, graphs, and forms with the section they apply to.

# Desktop Guides, Newsletters, Posted Material and Other Miscellaneous Information

To paraphrase a respected axiom: “The form should fit the function.” Putting every message on the electronic highway or to “proceduralize” every work process isn’t a reasonable idea. Some things are better said out-loud, while others belong on a one-page flyer that gets pinned to a bulletin board. And sometimes, you should change the way you communicate because the old way is stale.

Here are a few varieties of written communications along with some tips and cautions:

## Desktop Guides

**Good For:**

Broad, unregulated topics such as interpersonal and basic computer skills.

They can be used effectively to direct readers toward a specific goal (such as how to get in shape) or refer them to more technical sources (procedures and manuals).

**Cautions:**

Don’t make them too intricate.

A desktop guide should serve as a complement to other formal documents; it shouldn’t replace them.

Though specific suggestions, examples, and even warnings can be peppered throughout a guide; it shouldn’t become an instruction book with little leeway for personal styles and opinions.

What’s nice about desktop guides is that they allow for humor and a wide variety of structure.

## Newsletters

**Good For:**

Updating groups on a fluid topic (such as information technology).

Newsletters work well as a marketing tool.

They can be used to keep people interested in a subject over a long period of time.

**Cautions:**

People are already bombarded with loads to read; the last thing they want is another newsletter—unless it contains helpful, relevant material.

Don't ramble. Get to the point in your articles and lay off the business speak.

Internal newsletters will also die if they're dry. Take a tip from Madison Avenue and spice up your messages with some humor, wit, and graphics.

Also, remember this fact: white space is important.

## Posted Material

**Good For:**

Follow-up to announcements, forms, and information that must be made available to everyone working in or visiting an area.

**Cautions:**

Visit Princeton University's campus and you'll find hundreds of flyers posted one on top of each other on bulletin boards, walls, and even trees. It's overkill. If everything gets posted, nothing gets noticed.

You should be selective about what you post on a bulletin board.
Brief safety notices, upcoming events, and awards are the types of topics that lend themselves to being posted.

Keep in mind that some people rarely read posted material. So if it's imperative that everyone find out about something, do more than just post the message. Send out a letter or include it in a meeting agenda.

## Anything Else

Match the form with the function and you won't go wrong. Whether you're planning to use a computer or a tent-card, ask yourself "Why am I using *this* form to communicate *this* message?" If you are clear on the answer, go ahead—communicate. If not, you're rolling the dice on the results of your efforts. Take the time to figure out why you think the mode you've chosen is best. It'll be worth it.

Here are some questions that might help you decide what type of package your message should come in:

- Is this form of communication already overused?
- Is it the most efficient way to send the message?
- If it isn't the most efficient form, why am I using it? (There may be another factor that makes efficiency of little importance.)
- Am I using this method because I don't know any better?
- Would I send this any differently if a lot of my own money was riding on how well it is received?

No matter what form you use, keep your audience in mind. Write for them, not yourself.

# The Power of Your Personality

How do people know you? It may seem like a strange question, but think on it for a moment. No matter what your reputation is among your co-workers and clients, how did they get the information to form the opinion they have about you? Barring prejudice and preconceived notions, there are only four ways: from your voice, words, appearance, and movements (actions).

The way you control and send out these signals form the distinctive qualities that other people consider your personality. They also determine how powerful and persuasive your messages are—particularly your verbal messages.

Here are two well-established facts:

> *How* you say something has much more impact than what you say.
>
> Even more amazing, your voice (how you say something) and what you say (the actual words) make *less* of an impact than your facial expressions.

What does this mean? If you want to be an accurate, believable, and persuasive communicator you should spend time learning how to better control your voice and body language.

A few years ago a study was done at a major university on how people receive messages from other people. It showed that:

- Fifty-five percent of what we learn from others comes from their body language.
- Thirty-eight percent comes from the tone of their voice.
- Seven percent comes from the words they say.

# In Person

We can all remember a time when we saw a friend or loved one who seemed upset. When asked what was wrong, we were greeted with teary eyes, a scrunched face, and a cheerful, “Nothing, I’m fine.” We didn’t believe them.

Clearly our actions speak louder than our words, and our body language conveys messages that are more believable than what we say. Your ability to read your clients’ body language and vocal tone, and project your own in a way that says, “I’m here to help,” is one of the least expensive and most powerful skills you can control.

We’ll start with body language and its primary aspects, which are:

1. eye contact
2. facial expressions
3. body posture and movement
4. hand gestures

If overdone or underdone, body language can misfire and create a negative impression. Although body language is not an exact science, some general rules do apply.

**Eye Contact** is one of the most powerful of all body language skills. It is called an attending skill because it lets clients and co-workers know that you are interested, receptive, and attentive to what they are saying. Eye contact allows you to listen to people’s feelings as well as to their words.

Effective eye contact is achieved by putting a soft focus on a person’s face. For example, the moment a person walks up to you, regardless of what you are doing, make immediate eye contact by focusing on the whole face, not just the eyes. As the conversation moves on, look away from time to time to avoid giving the impression that you are staring.

> **OVERDONE:** Students of the Zombie School of Body Language stare a person down with a hard gaze and never move their eyes off him.
>
> **UNDERDONE:** You walk up to the person and instead of looking up at you, she continues to look down at her desk. Likewise, when you are talking to someone and he constantly looks around the room and not at you, you get the impression that he has something more important that he’d rather do.

**Facial Expressions** let everyone around you know if you are happy, sad, excited, and so on. Be careful not to let the stresses of the day gather on your brow so that you resemble a scrunched up prune. When you visit a client (or a fellow employee) make sure your facial expression set a positive tone before you even begin speaking. A relaxed or pleasant facial expression is the ideal most of the time. However, when clients are concerned or upset, you need to adjust your facial expression to suit their state of mind.

**OVERDONE:** Imagine how annoyed you would be if your bank teller informed you that you were five thousand dollars overdrawn—and he had a big fat grin on his face! Even a positive facial expression, such as smiling, can be overdone. Your facial expressions should look natural.

**UNDERDONE:** The daydreaming stare, faraway gaze, and blank look are all classic expressions that can creep over you face without you even realizing it.

**Body Posture**—and body movement in particular—show your energy level and interest in what the other person is saying. You can tell when people are listening impatiently or want to end the conversation by some simple body language clues such as:

- leaning back or stepping away
- turning their bodies away from you
- pushing away from their desks or tables
- gathering up papers
- closing their briefcases while you are still talking
- looking at their watches repeatedly

To show that you are intently listening to and interested in a conversation, do the following (see Part IV—"Tips and Techniques, Active Listening"):

1. Nod.
2. Face the person.
3. Lean forward.

**OVERDONE:** While occasional nodding shows that you are listening, continual nodding communicates impatience. This distracting nod-nod-nod is used to hurry the conversation along. This action translates to the person talking as, "Hurry up and finish so that I can say what I want to!" (Nodding during a lull in conversation is a clue that you do not have any connection with what's going on around you.) Also, leaning forward slightly lets the person know that you are interested in what is being said, but don't lean so close that you invade the person's space.

**UNDERDONE:** Many sci-fi movies show aliens with stiff body movements and facial expressions. Their lack of humanness is emphasized by their staring straight ahead with their arms pinned to their sides and their heads locked forward in one position. Don't let this phenomenon happen to you. Make a conscious effort to show, with your body language, that you are from this planet.

**Hand Gestures** help you express your feelings (even on the phone). Some people talk with their hands and seem to be conducting an orchestra whenever they speak. The key, whether you use your hands a little or a lot, is to be natural in your movements. Your gestures should not distract from the conversation. As for sending "signals" there are two main types of gestures: closed and opened. (See Part IV—Tips and Techniques, "Presentation Skills" for more information on hand gestures.)

### Open-hand gestures (flat hand, palm up, or palm out)

When used to give directions, they convey an invitation to move or look in a certain direction. Open hand gestures are also more gracious and a softer way to point at a person or object. They help to show that you want the listener to be part of the conversation.

### Closed-hand gestures (pointing with index finger or closed fist movements)

These type of hand movements can be construed as a command, rather than an invitation when used to convey a direction. They have their place and often do a good job of punctuating a point. Be careful though; they can be considered rude and intimidating when directed at another person.

**OVERDONE:** To see overdone hand gestures at their best, watch one of those TV commercials for a car dealership during the late, late, movie. Focusing on what the dealers are saying is often difficult because their hands are flying around in big, unnatural, exaggerated, and distracting movements.

**UNDERDONE:** A noticeable lack of hand gestures can be just as distracting as waving them around like an octopus. Some people are so self-conscious about what to do with their hands that they clasp them behind their backs, in front of their bodies, or pin them to their sides. This lack of motion gives the impression that the person feels threatened by—or uncomfortable with—what is being said.

## It’s Not What You Say, It’s How You Say It: Tone of Voice

No matter what words you use, the tone of your voice reveals what you think and feel. For example:

- A monotone and flat voice says to the person: “I’m bored and have absolutely no interest in what you’re talking about.”
- Slow speed and low pitch communicates the message: “I’m depressed and want to be left alone.”
- A high pitched and emphatic voice says: “I’m enthusiastic about this subject.”
- An abrupt speed and very loud tone says: “I’m angry and not open to input!”
- High pitch combined with drawn out speed conveys: “I don’t believe what I’m hearing.”

Developing your vocal tone is one of the most valuable business skills you can acquire, especially if you talk on the phone often. Here are five characteristics that will help you to be a winner with your voice:

1. inflection
2. volume control
3. pacing
4. intensity

**Inflection** is the wave-like movement of highs and lows in your pitch. It’s the peaks and valleys in your voice that lets others know how interested (or uninterested) you are in what they are saying. When inflection is missing, your voice can sound monotone. The dictionary defines monotone as a series of words or sentences in one unvaried key or pitch—a tedious sameness.

### Improving your inflection

Some people are born with naturally interesting voices and seem to effortlessly use inflection to sound warm and friendly. Others of us, who are not so fortunate, need to practice. If you feel that your vocal inflection needs polishing, try these four things to improve the quality of inflection in your voice.

1. **Smile when talking (especially on the phone).**

   One way to positively affect the inflection in your voice is to smile, especially when you first answer the telephone. The reason for doing so is not psychological but physiological. When you smile, the soft palate at the back of your mouth raises and makes the sound waves more fluid. For those of you who have ever sung in a choir (or in a shower), you know that the wider you open your mouth and the more teeth you show, the better tone you get. The same applies to smiling; it helps your voice sound friendly, warm, and receptive.

Some telemarketing companies are so convinced of the value of smiling when talking on the phone that they install mirrors above the telemarketers' desks to remind them to smile. (These are the same people, by the way, who call you when you are about to sit down to dinner.)

2. **Practice stressing words.**

Another way to improve your inflection is to be aware of how stressing certain words changes the feeling of what you are saying. The following sentence "What would you like us to do about it?" changes in feeling, meaning, and tone when you:

- say it defensively (emphasizing the words "would you")

  "What *would you* like us to do about it?"

- say it with curiosity (emphasizing the words "like us")

  "What would you *like us* to do about it?"

- say it with apathy (not emphasizing any of the words)

"What would you like us to do about it?"

1. **Breathe (deep, long, and slow).**

Believe it or not, the inflection in your voice can be greatly increased by learning to take long, slow, deep breaths. Most people become shallow breathers when they're under pressure.

The next time you are in a stressful situation, try to notice what happens to your breathing. The more upset you become, the shallower and quicker your breath will be. When this breathing pattern happens, your vocal cords tend to tighten, making your voice go up and sound strained. By being aware of your breath, especially under stressful situations, you can slow down your breathing, thereby relaxing your vocal cords, bringing down your pitch, and creating a calmer tone of voice.

**Volume Control** —Imagine you are at a party talking to a close friend when she leans toward you and starts to tell you something private. She begins speaking in a very soft voice, almost a whisper. Invariably, as soon as your friend's tone lowers, the people standing nearby will strain their heads in your direction, trying to hear what is being said.

Such is the power and uncanny magnetism of volume control.

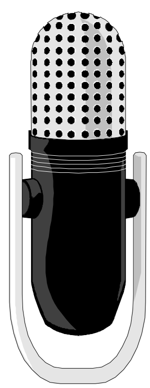
Be aware of your volume. Raising or lowering it is an effective way to emphasis a point. It will also help keep your listeners interested in what you are saying.

If a client or co-worker is angry and speaking loudly, don't yell back at the same volume (even though your instinctive reaction may be to do so). Instead, behave like a professional and start out by speaking at a somewhat lower volume than the client, gradually bringing the person's volume down to yours. With a confused client, speaking a little louder than usual helps give him or her something to focus on and helps you to control the conversation more easily.

**Pacing** —Pacing is approximately matching the other person's rate of speech and intensity of feeling. Pacing is the best single tool you have for creating rapport with your voice. By focusing on the similarities (instead of the differences) between you and the other person, you meet him at his level, making him feel more at ease.

## The Disc Jockey

Too much inflection is just as bad as too little. Don't scare your clients away by unleashing your hidden desire to be a disc jockey on them. Answering the phone with a resounding have-we-got-a-deal-for-you tone of voice creates instant distrust. These are the people, usually trying to sell you something, who call and excitedly say, "HELLO!" as if you are a long lost friend. This tone, as you know, is often your cue to hang up.



# Business Presentations

The key to an effective business presentation is preparation.

## Developing your presentation

Decide precisely what your objective is (what you want the presentation to do).

According to award-winning public speaker Christopher Hegarty, “The precision you use in identifying and establishing clear and valuable objectives will determine the precision and relevancy of your presentation.” So don’t scrimp on this part. Your objective should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and possible in your time allotted.

Once you know what your objective is, think about your audience. How much do your listeners know about the subject? Also consider the intent of your presentation. Is it to instruct, to persuade, to inspire, or to entertain? Perhaps you have more than one goal.

Gather together all the research necessary to make an outline of your presentation which will break out into three parts:

1. **The Introduction**
2. **The Main Body**
3. **The Conclusion**

As you prepare your presentation, keep this in mind: What one main idea do I want the audience to remember? That should help you to tighten up your material and keep you focused. While it’s important that all of your main points be backed up with facts and supporting data, remember that people like personal stories, funny anecdotes, interesting examples—anything that adds a little “life” to your presentation.

**Devote a lot of time to your introduction.** You need to grab your audience’s attention right away or they may be tuned out by the time you get to your best material. Various ways in which you can introduce your topic:

1. If the topic is thought-provoking or controversial, attack the topic head-on by simply announcing it.
2. Begin with a human interest story, an illustration, or a funny anecdote relevant to the topic.
3. Startle the audience by beginning with an exciting question or an arousing statement.
4. Use a quote or an idea from somebody else.
5. Explain in factual terms why the topic is important to your audience.
6. Be careful about opening with a joke. In fact, unless you are a brilliant joke teller who always gets a laugh, don't open with a joke. It's not worth the risk of bombing.

**The main body should contain your proof.** This part of your presentation should make it apparent to your audience that you have a thorough knowledge of the topic. Back up your points with facts, numbers and examples. If you want to convince your audience of the wisdom of your views on the topic, begin with material that agrees with those views. Don't argue. Just explain your points. Your points should be clearly defined by the time you conclude.

**Fine tune your conclusion.** Your closing remarks are your last chance to drive home your ideas. Moreover, your final impression will probably linger in your listeners' minds. So, you need to craft your conclusion with care.

The conclusion of your presentation usually should be no more than 10 percent of the content. That means for a 20-minute presentation, the conclusion is generally only two minutes in length—about 300 words.

That's not an ironclad rule. Sometimes it's effective to present a few second, to-the-point, punch conclusion.

A few more things to keep in mind when designing your conclusion:

1. Avoid limp endings. "Well, I see our time is almost up, so let me conclude by saying . . . " or "Let me summarize . . . " or the overused "With that I'd like to thank . . ." There is no need to have a transitional phrase to introduce your conclusion. However, if you want to use a signal, make it upbeat and positive—never use a signal that denotes a restriction or negative feeling about yourself or your presentation such as "Well, I guess you're anxious to get on with other things."
2. Summarizing the main ideas of your presentation may be a good idea—provided it is a brief summary. This can be as simple and brief as "So as you can see from the six categories of change I showed you, we must have more help for our Y2K project."
3. Use short sentences. Keep the sentences of your conclusion relatively short and crisp. Your ending should be sharp as a cliff, not a winding down, gradual slope into nothing. Using short sentences will also help to make your ending memorable.
4. Include a "call to action" in your conclusion. What do you want your audience to do now that they've listened and watched you for the last several minutes? (If you don't want your audience to take a physical action, you may want them to change their views to yours.)

5. Don’t tell your listeners that you’ve forgotten some point. Save it for later or include it in your next presentation.
6. Don’t merely stop at the end of your material. Instead, finish your presentation with a smooth, polished ending. Wrap it up—like a package with a nice bow on top. Just stopping your talk after you’ve presented the last of your ideas and data is jarring to your listeners. They expect you to restate your main idea and then leave them with something worth remembering.

Finally, once you send a signal to your audience (such as by saying “finally”), indicating that your presentation is about to conclude, don’t hem and haw and add 10 more points; conclude conclusively. Follow the advice of the King in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*: “Begin at the beginning an go ‘til you come to the end: Then Stop.”

## If You Want To Add Humor To Your Presentation

A fundamental aspect of working a bit of humor into your presentation is that you must be comfortable with it. It must be the sort of material that you feel natural in telling. Any discomfort that you feel will be picked up by your audience, and then you are all uncomfortable. Stick to your own idea of what’s funny. Grab what you hear and see around you and in your own life. Fit it into the subject matter and tell it well. People will love it because it’s real, natural, and it’s yours.

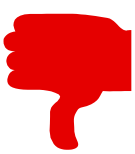
# Phone Etiquette

The essence of dealing with people, politely and efficiently, over the phone can be boiled down to one simple thing: telephone etiquette. Being nice on the phone isn't difficult if you follow some simple guidelines.

Unlike body language, which can vary from culture to culture, telephone etiquette has a universally agreed upon set of rules. Even small things, such as how long it takes for your phone to be answered or the words you use when you answer a call, can create a lasting impression.

## When talking on the phone

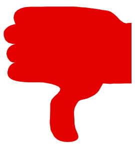
1. Sound positive and warm.
2. Use a short friendly greeting.
3. Call people when you like to be called.
4. Thank the caller for waiting if you do put the person on hold.
5. Leave short messages on answering machines or voice mail.
6. Give a reason for putting the person on hold.
7. Stand up when you want to sound your best.



1. Assume the caller knows who you are.
2. Use a mile-long greeting.
3. Talk to your coworkers while you pick up the phone.
4. Leave confidential information on answering machines.

## When Answering The Phone

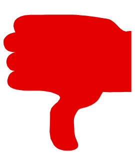
1. Answer in three rings or less.
2. Answer with “Hello, Good Morning, etc.”
3. Then say, “(state your department name), this is Jane Smith” (outside calls use your company name and department).
4. End with “How may I help you?”



1. Let ring till . . . ?
2. Push speaker phone button.
3. Answer with “Jones” or “I S” or “Yo” or “Who is it?” or “Hello, it’s a beautiful day here at your downtown technical service department. How may I help you?”

## Putting Someone On Hold

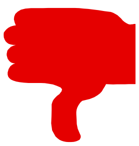
1. Ask: “Do you mind if I put you on hold?” or “Can I put you on hold?”
2. Wait for a response.
3. Tell them why: “I need to go check your file.”
4. Let them know how long they will be holding. “It should only take me about a minute.”
5. (When you get back on the line.) “Thank you for holding”



1. “Hold please.” (click).
2. Shoot for eternity (> 3 minutes).
3. Don’t return to the line to keep the person updated.

## What to Say When Transferring a Call

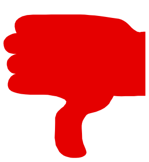
1. "I'm sorry this is the (name your department). Bob Jenkins in security may be able to answer your question."
2. "Would you like me to transfer you?"
3. "Hello Bob, this is Tom in (name your department), I have a Mr. Pain on the line who has a security question . . ."
4. "Mr. Pain, I'm going to transfer you now, Bob Jenkins number is . . ."
5. Transfer caller.



1. "Nope, you got the wrong department." (click)
2. "I'll transfer you to security." (click — dial tone)
3. Don't let the person in security know they are getting a transferred call.

## Taking Messages

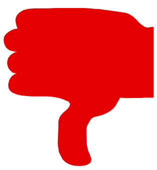
1. "Betty isn't available at the moment." or "Tom is out of the office today."
2. "I am expecting her back by three."
3. "May I ask who is calling please?"
4. "Mrs. Aggravate, may I take a message for Betty Neverhere, or can I help you with something myself?"
5. Take accurate messages.



1. "Mark hasn't come in yet today." or "I don't have a clue where Denise is." or "Rob had an emergency and isn't here." or "Terry has some kind of intestinal flu and she's been camped out in the bathroom most of the day."
2. Not volunteer to take a message or offer to help the person.
3. If you do take a message, don't leave out vital information or simply write "Mrs. A. called."

## Ending a Call

1. "So, Mr. Dense, I'll send out the information on our new Intranet policy tomorrow."
2. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"
3. "Thank you for the call."
4. Let the client hang up first.
5. Write down any actions NOW!



"See ya."

**How to End a Conversation:** Stop saying uh-huh and mm-hmm (these little sounds are appropriately called "encouragers") And don't introduce a new topic or add a comment or question.

Finally, say something positive about the person or the conversation and then clearly state what you need to do. "It was good talking to you about desktop publishing. I need to finish this report I started three hours ago."

When 590 executives were asked to list the telephone responses which annoyed them the top four were:

"Please hold"—followed by an immediate click.

"Not in the office right now."

"Can you tell me what you're calling about."

"I'll connect you with voice mail."

# Service Calls

So you're going to fix a client's problem. That's a good thing isn't it? And shouldn't the client be thrilled to see you? We all know that in the real world that's not always the case. The person you're calling on may be in a sour mood for several different reasons, including the computer problem you've been sent to solve.

The initiative you take will have a strong impact on your reputation *and* your department. That's because the difference between lousy service, good service (which is not so easy to find), and "I-can't-believe-I'm-still-on-this-planet" excellent service, is the amount of *initiative* you take. A synonym for initiative is the phrase *taking the first step*.

Here are just a few first steps you can take:

1. **Show the client you're glad to be helping him**. Do this with your greeting and facial expressions. Even if the person is in a miserable mood, stay upbeat.

2. **Listen actively.** Let the person express himself. (See "Dealing With Difficult Clients" below.)

3. **Be polite.** If the person is at his desk, ask before you move or rearrange the work area.

4. **Thank the client for giving you a change to help her.** Yes, the client benefits the most from your visit. But excellent client service leaves the client (or customer) feeling they have not imposed on the service provider.

5. **Follow up occasionally.** Call the client, or send an e-mail message, to see if the problem stayed away or if there's anything else you could help them with. Taking the initiative to follow-up goes a long way in building a solid service reputation.

## Dealing With Difficult Clients

Service providers need to know how to work well with difficult people. Regardless of whether the client is rude, frustrated, confused, or irate, most minor clashes don't have to turn into guerrilla warfare. Sure company policy may not allow them to get what they want, but that's no reason for you to be brusque with them. You should still want to come to terms somehow or at least show that you want to work with them to come to an amiable solution.

The following five steps will help you through trying times with difficult clients (or anybody else):

## Step One: Let the Person Vent

When your clients are upset they want two things: First, they want to express their feelings, and then they want their problem solved. Sometimes you may feel the client's venting is a waste of time because you want to move on and solve the problem. However, trying to resolve the situation without first listening to the client's feelings rarely works. Only after the person has vented can he begin to hear what you have to say.

## Step Two: Avoid Getting Trapped in a Negative Filter

The friction between you and a difficult client is often worsened by how you interpret his or her behaviors. Take a moment and think of some of the names that you have called difficult clients—not to their face, but privately, under your breath. You may even want to jot a few of your favorites down in disappearing ink.

## Step Three: Express Empathy

If you give a people a chance to vent, they will eventually run out of steam; then you can begin to participate more actively in the conversation. Giving a brief and sincere expression of empathy works wonders to calm a difficult client.

## Step Four: Begin Active Problem Solving

Until now, you have been on the receiving end of the conversation with your client. You can begin active problem solving by asking questions that help clarify the cause of the person's problem.

## Step Five: Mutually Agree on the Solution

Once you gather all the facts, you need to work with the person to come up with an acceptable solution to the situation. You may, at this point, find it necessary to take a brief time-out from the client so that you can do the behind-the-scenes work necessary to solve the problem. Finally, when you both agree on how to resolve the problem, explain the steps that you will take to implement the solution.

# What Good are Meetings?

Meetings have a bad reputation and deserve every bit of it.

Most meetings turn out to be a lousy way of getting things done. Yet the average corporate employee spends up to thirty-five percent of his or her time on meetings. A recent survey showed that senior managers spend just short of half their time in meetings. And you can bet that much of that meeting time is a waste. Why? Well, here are a few reasons (you may be able to add to this list from your own experience):

- People don't know what the meeting is for.
- No one is clear about what's to be accomplished.
- There's no agenda or timetable.
- The meeting runs too long.
- It is boring.
- Discussions wander and are unfocused.
- People tell "war stories."
- There are too many items to cover.
- No one wants to talk about the real problem.
- Some participants aren't interested or shouldn't be there.
- There are too many distractions and interruptions.
- "Visuals" and handouts are nonexistent or poorly done.
- People are uncooperative.
- The "boss" has already decided on a course of action. The meeting is a rubber stamp.
- People attack each other's ideas.
- The meeting is used even though another method(s) would be better.

Peter Drucker tells us in *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* that "There are a number of common symptoms of poor organization . . . first, the symptom of too many meetings attended by too many people . . .The human dynamics of meetings are so complex as to make them very poor tools for getting any work done."

Does this mean all is hopeless? No. There are things you can do to make your meetings useful and effective, to make them powerful tools for getting work done. Still, before you decide to hold a productive meeting you need to ask yourself "Is the meeting necessary?" There are loads of reasons why you should NOT schedule a meeting. For example, you shouldn't have a $1,000 meeting to solve a $100 problem.

Nine more reasons why you should NOT hold a meeting:

1. You can't describe what it's for or its outcome.
2. There's a less expensive and faster alternative.
3. You have no time to plan or prepare.
4. You have to deal with personnel issues like hiring, firing, and negotiating salaries.
5. There isn't enough information to make any decisions.
6. The agenda items could be communicated better by telephone, memo, or one-to-one discussions.
7. Your mind is made up on the issue(s) and you have already made your decision.
8. The subject is trivial.
9. The only reason for having the meeting is because you've always had this meeting in the past (weekly or monthly staff meeting, etc.).

There certainly are other reasons not to hold a meeting but they all boil down to one question: "Is a meeting the best, most appropriate and practical way to handle this?" When the answer is "no" you should probably not hold a meeting.

If you are comfortable with its purpose and outcome, then go ahead and prepare for your meeting.

# Preparing for a Successful Meeting

Consider the words of Confucius: “In all things, success depends upon previous preparation, and without such preparation, there is such to be failure.” If the meetings you conduct aren’t very productive, perhaps it’s because you don’t prepare well enough for them. Though there is no set rule, rest assured that ten minutes of arrangement is NOT enough preparation for a two-hour meeting.

## Setting The Agenda

Preparing a well-thought-out agenda is perhaps the most important part to creating a successful meeting. Everyone should know what to expect before coming to a meeting. You must be explicit about:

- what’s going to happen
- how the meeting is going to be run
- who is going to play what roles
- what problems will the meeting solve
- the actions each member needs to take before the meeting

If all participants receive a detailed agenda at least a day (preferable a week or more) before the meeting, they are more likely to come prepared. It will also prevent most of the common causes for confusion at the beginning of meetings. Because most of the procedural questions will be settled in advance, your meetings will be shorter and more effective.

Professional football quarterback Roger Staubach once said that, “In business or in football, it takes a lot of unspectacular preparation to produce spectacular results.” He is correct. So, if you want your meetings to be spectacular (or at least worth everyone’s precious time), prepare for them.

Every agenda or meeting notice should include: the date of the meeting, who called the meeting, when the meeting will begin and end, where the meeting is being held and the names of all attendees. Besides these logistics, it will help you to include the following:

## Type and Purpose of the Meeting

Too often a meeting's purpose is unclear. This makes it nearly impossible to tell if the meeting was successful. According to Aristotle, "There is no success without applying our resources toward a specific aim and then going for it." People who come to a meeting should know the "specific aim" they are shooting for. This is also true for each agenda item.

There is a big difference between meeting to make a decision and meeting to share information. You should have a clear picture of what type of meeting it is, and its purpose.

Include a brief "statement of purpose" in the meeting notice or agenda. This will help prevent people from arriving with different sets of expectations and priorities.

To do this successfully, you need to use consistent terms. When you say, "We're going to have a problem-solving meeting," everyone should know what that means. It doesn't make much difference what words you choose as long as everyone attending understands them.

## Specify Desired Outcomes

Imagine in advance that the meeting has just finished and that it was successful. Ask yourself: "What would success look like?" "What was accomplished?" "What problems did we solve?" "How many opportunities did we identify and which decisions did we make?" "What other kinds of sharing and learning would have made the meeting successful?" Now include these desired outcomes in the meeting notice.

When everyone understands the desired outcomes, you can deal with unrealistic expectations in advance (or at least before the meeting starts).

## Agenda items, persons responsible, process, and time given

Be sure to list individual agenda items. Be as specific as possible. The more you can define items that involve problems, the more effectively you will be able to use the creative power of the group. Try stating them as questions.

For each agenda item:

- list the person responsible for the item
- the process that will be used such as presentation or brainstorming
- the time allotted for the item

You might not be able to give a specific problem-solving method. However, you do want to communicate whether you expect the group simply to listen to a report or to become involved in solving a particular problem or making a decision.

An example of a completed agenda item:

| ITEM | PERSON RESPONSIBLE | PROCESS | TIME |
|---|---|---|---|
| “Progress report on the desktop roll-out: Do we need an extension of the deadline? | Hal Lowe | Presentation and decision-making | 20 minutes |

## Give Out Background Materials

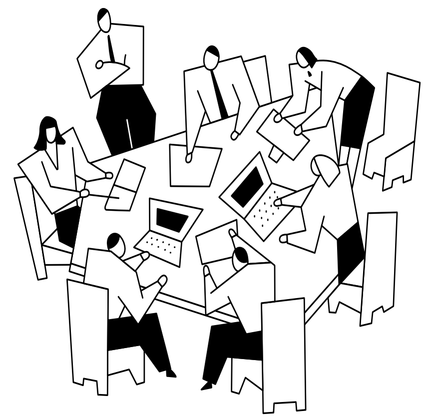
If there are presentations (or participants need to do homework), list the background materials you are sending with the agenda. Also list any documents that participants need to review.

Be realistic. Most people aren’t very conscientious about reading handouts; so keep them short. Usually they’re read at the last moment, so don’t send material out more than a week or so in advance.

# Conducting a Successful Meeting

What is a "successful meeting?" Webster's defines *success* as "The favorable termination of a venture," and *meeting* as "A coming together; assembly." Consequently, it would be reasonable to define a *successful meeting* as "a coming together which ends favorable." Generally, this occurs when the meeting fulfills its purpose.

Elements within the meeting may threaten its purpose. Some standard reefs are:



- the hidden agenda, in which a member injects a subject of personal interest into the discussion
- hostility or a stressful environment
- mixed echelons, which can cause "lower status" attendees to feel intimidated
- signs of disinterest, such as no participation or sagging attendance

Successful meetings should have a crisp, direction-setting start, a logical on-track development, and a constructive wrap-up. On the way to accomplishing these there may be various kinds of features, such as visual presentations, oral reports, and guest speakers. Here are more details on conducting a successful meeting.

## Assign a facilitator

A facilitator should be a neutral servant of the group who does not evaluate or contribute ideas.

If you can't assign a neutral facilitator, you should still give someone the responsibility to help the group focus its energies on a task by suggesting methods and procedures. The person should also protect all members of the group from attack, and make sure that everyone has an opportunity to participate.

Why have a facilitator? Because a human system of regulating flow is almost always more responsive than a mechanical one. Have you ever had to sit at a red light when there was a lot of traffic on your street and none on the cross street? A police officer would immediately see the situation and adjust the directional flow to meet the momentary need.

The same applies to rigid rules in a meeting (or a meeting with no rules and controls). Having a human system—a sensitive moderator—allows for adjustments to the moment-by-moment needs of the group and ensures topics flow smoothly.

## Encourage participation from everyone

The quality of decision-making and problem-solving produced by a well-facilitated group can be higher than that achieved by an individual working alone.

Whoever facilitates the meeting should notice when a member is not contributing and ask him or her questions relating to the topic being discussed. If the person rarely contributes because he is shy, there may not be much you can do besides helping him to feel comfortable. On the other hand, it may be because he or she doesn't understand the topic or is afraid of being lambasted by another member. You can often prevent this by openly discussing the rights of everyone in the committee.

It may be that the person doesn't want to contribute. Joel Smilow, former executive vice president of Beatrice Companies, said, "I once hired someone with a great track record in companies somewhat different in nature from ours. His first day, we were at a meeting, and I noticed that his boss and I were taking copious notes, but the new guy wasn't taking notes or asking questions."

This flagged Joel to what proved to be the reason. He didn't have the "interest or the drive."

When this is the case with someone who attends your meetings, ask yourself if you should invite the individual to the meeting anymore. (It may be that he or she shows up to get a work break.) Of course you should talk with the person first and find out why the person doesn't want to contribute.

## Don't begin solving a problem until it is well defined

A common reason for ineffective meetings is poorly defined problems. This causes confusion and makes for difficult discussions.

When you define something, you set boundaries around it; you say what it is and what it isn't. When the boundaries are too wide there is a larger likelihood for misunderstandings between committee members. (Likewise, boundaries that are too narrow inhibit creative solutions.) Example: Agenda item number 4 is, "How can we improve our reputation with clients?"

This question is too broad for an agenda item. It could lead to an hour-long argument over which things impact your reputation the most. Whereas "How can we improve our reputation during service calls?" would focus the group enough to allow for a reasonable discussion.

## Solve one problem at a time

You can think about only one thing at any instant in time. Try listening to two conversations at once. You will find yourself jumping back and forth between the two. You can't listen to two people at the same time. What this means is that all the stimuli from your environment and from your subconscious must line up and file by your attention in single, discrete chunks. This is useful because it keeps you from getting overloaded and scattered. Your single point of attention is a built-in safety device.

According to *How To Make Meetings Work*, by Michael Doyle and David Straus, "If everyone mentally heads off in different directions, the result can be confusion, tension, and lack of productivity—the multi-headed animal syndrome. To work effectively a group needs a single focus, a single point of reference." Therefore, when a second topic rears its head, kill it! Let the group know that there are two or more topics "in the air," and at least one has to go.

## Follow-up and summarize

Before the meeting concludes, clarify the actions that were assigned: "John, we'll depend on you to check the figures and send copies to each member." Then verify the completion dates for the action or milestone. Also give a quick rundown of points that were accepted, rejected, or postponed. (Make a record of the important points.)

It's worth the effort to have successful meetings; unlike boring unproductive meetings that are morale busters, successful productive ones stimulate people to action and perk up their morale.

# Seventeen Steps To a Better Meeting

*Before the Meeting*

1. Plan the meeting carefully: who, what, when, where, why and how many.
2. Prepare and send out an agenda in advance.
3. Come early and set up (or at least check out) the meeting room.

*At the Beginning of the Meeting*

4. Start on time.
5. If participants don't know each other, have them introduce themselves and state their expectations for the meeting.
6. Clearly define roles.
7. Review, revise, and order the agenda.
8. Set clear time limits.
9. Review action items from the previous meeting.

*During the Meeting*

10. Focus on the same problem or topic in the same way at the same time; and only one at a time.

*At the End of the Meeting*

10. Establish action items: who, what, when.
11. Set the date and place of the next meeting and develop a preliminary agenda.
12. Evaluate the meeting.
13. Close the meeting crisply, positively, and on time.
14. Clean up and rearrange the room.

*After the Meeting*

16. Prepare a meeting memo.
17. Follow-up on action items and begin to plan the next meeting.

# How To Make Your Writing More Powerful

Wordy writing is weak writing. You should keep your business writing short and simple. Use small words, not big ones. Keep paragraphs and sentences short. Whenever you can logically break a long paragraph into two shorter ones, do so.

For manuals and longer letters, break the writing into short sections, each with a descriptive subhead, and limit each section to one topic, theme or idea. Sentences, paragraphs, and chapters that express one idea are easiest to understand; one of the most common writing mistakes is to cram too many thoughts into a single sentence or paragraph. A few rules to help you write more powerfully:

1. Remove unnecessary modifiers.

   **Not:** We absolutely guarantee all our products.

   **But:** We guarantee all our products.

   **Not:** Her contribution was very crucial to our success.

   **But:** Her contribution was crucial to our success.

2. Don’t identify places, books, or objects that are self-evident.

   **Not:** He is from the city of Houston.

   **But:** He is from Houston.

3. Avoid beginning your sentences with empty words such as *frankly*, *essentially*, and *basically*.

4. Whenever possible, remove phrases such as *at the rate of* and *in the time of*.

   **Not:** He types at the rate of 55 wpm.

   **But:** He types 55 wpm.

5. Avoid the expression *serve as a*. Rephrase the sentence or try substituting *is* or *are*.

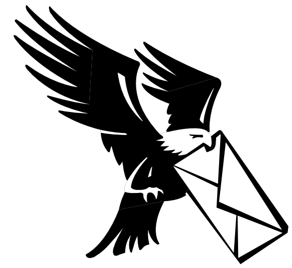
   **Not:** She serves as our proofreader.

   **But:** She is our proofreader.

6. Avoid the phrase the *reason is because*. You can often trim it down to *because* by rewording the sentence.

   **Not:** The reason he finishes early is because he is organized.
   **But:** He finishes early because his is organized.

# Start Letters Off Right



To get your letters off to a strong start, follow these guidelines:

**Limit your first sentence to 17 words.** If the sentence is longer than 17 words, edit it.

**Make your opening words strong and clear.** You'll get into trouble right off the bat if you start out with the wrong word. Red flags should pop up if you use words in any of these three groups:

> **A. Pronouns** such as "I." "I" is OK anywhere else—but not the first word of the first sentence. The most basic rule of business writing is "put the reader first." Instead of beginning your memo with "I would like to suggest. . . ." try saying this: "Would you consider . . .?"
>
> **B. Prepositions.** When you begin sentences with a preposition, the sentence is sure to start slowly: "In an effort to provide employees with more flexibility this summer, I would like to suggest that we try flextime." Instead, put the prepositional phrase at the end of the sentence: "Let's try flextime hours to give employees more flexibility this summer."
>
> **C. Participles.** Participles are those "ing" words such as "referring," "responding," regarding." If you begin with participles, you'll get off to a slow and wordy start: "According to our phone conversation yesterday . . ."

**Limit your introductory paragraph to three sentences.** That way you won't write run-on introductions. If possible, use one-sentence introductory paragraphs: *"Let's try flextime hours this summer."*

## Having Trouble Getting Started?

Writer's block can strike anyone at almost any time. The next time you're writing a letter and you can't seem to get started, try beginning the letter with the word "This." Not only will it direct your reader to the purpose of the message it'll also help you move on with your writing.

More Tips

Most times your writing needs to do more than just communicate information. You must also face the challenge of changing or reinforcing people’s attitudes and motivating them to act.

## To get readers into your copy:

- ❐ Use an attention-getting lead sentence that entices people to keep reading. One way: Promise readers they’ll learn more if they continue. Example:

  “This report shows you how your department can boost productivity by 40 percent.”

- ❐ Write with a conversational tone. Use the words “I,” “you” and “your” often. Result: By making readers feel they’re in a conversation, you’ll attract and hold their attention.

- ❐ Add personal touches that show readers they’re important. Examples: Hand address envelopes you’re mailing, mention the person’s name your writing to in the text, or hand write a postscript.

## Make the copy easy to read:

- ❐ Make the copy large enough so everyone can read it easily. Help the message stand out by using at least 12-point type with black ink on white or yellow paper.

- ❐ Use short words whenever you can. Why: People can read and understand them faster.

- ❐ Example: Say “needs,” not “requirements;” “help,” not “assistance;” and “show,” not “indicate.”

- ❐ Add a postscript. Research shows that postscripts are one of the most read parts of any letter.

## Move your audience:

When you need to motivate people to act, try these suggestions:

- ❐ Stress rewards. Make the audience feel and see itself enjoying the benefits of your message.

- ❐ Also, mention the benefits early in your copy. The audience is more likely to read on when the text clearly offers rewards.

- ❐ Before you call your reader(s) to action, include a thought they must agree with. Don’t give them a reason to say “no.”
  Example: “Don’t you think we should offer communication training to improve our customer service?” Better: “It’s been shown that a disgruntled client will tell several

people about the bad experience. This new communication training will prevent this from happening."

- Finally, tell readers what you want them to do. Select power verbs that command the audience to act. Example: "Find out about the new computer system." Or "Mark your calendar for January 15."

## Advertising techniques bring success to letters and memos

Don't be afraid to use the techniques of advertising in your business communications. Even the most routine memos can benefit:

- Break up the size of type blocks. For instance, move in the margins of a particularly important paragraph two or more inches on both sides.
- Use boldfaced, action-oriented headlines and subheads.
- Underline key phrases.
- Use bulleted lists rather than lines of narrative.
- Be aggressive in your use of white space. For instance, a memo of one or two paragraphs typically occupies the top few lines of the page. If you center those lines in the middle of the page, and surround it dramatically by white space, you will draw your readers into the story.

# Proofreading and Editing

Proofreading may not be the most exciting or glamorous task in the world, but your document's credibility depends on it. Successful proofreading is a team effort; the best method is to have several different people check your copy. If that's not possible—or if you just want to eliminate as many errors as you can before others look at your copy—you can still produce an error-free document by paying attention to these tips.

- ❒ **Make a line screen** that blocks out the page so that you can only look at one line at a time. This will slow you down and keep you from skimming just for content.
- ❒ **Read your document out of order.** Go backwards, page by page, line by line with your line screen, or word by word, or just shuffle the pages (make sure they are numbered!). Again, this forces you to slow your pace and concentrate on individual words.
- ❒ **Look carefully at the beginning of everything.** Many people race straight into the main body of the document, glancing only briefly at the first few words of a new page, paragraph, or section.
- ❒ **Errors come in clusters**. Don't let yourself relax when you spot a typo, or you'll miss the one right next to it.
- ❒ **Be conscious of typeface changes**. A different typeface can distract you. Double check yourself by reading more than once everything that's been <u>underlined</u>, CAPITALIZED, or printed in **bold** or *italics*.
- ❒ **Check numbering.** Make sure the chapters match the page numbers listed in your table of contents. Don't mis-number diagrams, figures, or tables, and don't skip any numbers.
- ❒ **Double check directions in the text.** If you read "see diagram on page 10," make sure the diagram is on page 10. It may have been moved in a later version of the text.
- ❒ **Add up all numbers.** Are calculations in the copy correct? Watch out for misplaced commas and decimal points. Make sure columns of numbers are evenly aligned. And here's a common mistake; if your heading reads "Ten Tips To Better Writing" make sure there are no more or less than ten tips.
- ❒ **Vary your proofreading routine.** Proofread at a different time of the day. If possible, take a break, put the document aside, and come back to it later with a rested eye. Reread the last few lines or pages to refresh your memory.

# Edit out the excess

Never rush a letter into the mail while it's still hot. Let it cool. Go work on something else for a while, then come back to edit. As one goal of your editing session, you'll want to root out wordiness. These three editing tips will help you find excess words—and remove them:

1. Underline "be," being," "been."

   **Wordy:** Action Requests are being processed as soon as they are received.

   **Concise:** We're processing Action Requests as soon as we receive them.

2. Underline infinitives. Too many infinitive phrases (ones that begin with *to*) make a wordy sentence.

   **Wordy:** We are going to conduct a poll to determine employee morale.

   **Concise:** We will conduct a poll to determine employee morale.

3. Underline word forms ending in "ion," "ism," or "ology" and omit as many as possible.

   **Wordy:** The communications trainers in your institution should have a methodology to acquire information on a new communications organization.

   **Concise:** Your communications trainers should know about a new professional organization.

## Ten most common proofreading errors

If you know where most errors occur when proofreading, you'll increase your ability to catch all errors. Here's a breakdown of the most common errors:

| | |
|---|---|
| Letters omitted | 14.5 % |
| Substitutions | 14.1 % |
| Space omitted | 10.7 % |
| Punctuation mark omitted | 10.5 % |
| Transpositions | 6.6 % |
| Word omitted | 5.9 % |
| Small letter for capital | 2.9 % |
| Full line omitted | 1.7 % |
| Spelling error | 1.6 % |
| Capital for small letter | 1.1 % |

Studies show that mistakes most likely in the latter half of a long line and in the middle of longer words. Pay special attention to the obvious (headlines, numbers) and the mundane (periods, commas, quotations marks).

# Presentation Skills

## Talking Effectively to Small Groups

- ❒ Meet personally as many people as possible beforehand.
- ❒ Get right to the point. The first 15 seconds is what grabs the listener. Don't start with "Thank you" and "I'm very happy to be here." Use an example or ask a thought provoking question that leads directly into your topic.
- ❒ Make eye contact with everyone in the audience at some time early in the presentation. Then, throughout the presentation look at one person for a few seconds before moving on to someone else in the group. Don't "sweep" your eyes around the room or avoid eye contact in any other way.
- ❒ Support main points with factual information and examples.
- ❒ Look for a creative conclusion—a provocative thought or action-suggesting statement.
- ❒ Never let a talk end with an answer to a question from the audience. After answering questions, always return to the main point of the presentation. The last word is important. It shouldn't be yielded to a questioner.
- ❒ Never ask the audience, "Any questions?" If there aren't any, the silence will be embarrassing. Instead, suggest, "There may be some questions." It makes a difference.
- ❒ Limit use of notes because it inhibits spontaneity. Write out key words or short phrases to jog thoughts.

## Remedies for Rambling

We've all had it at one time or another. *Ramblingitis*. It's not fatal, but it is annoying and can turn your listeners into zombies. There are three main reasons why we exhibit this "rambling syndrome":

- ❐ We have more time than material.
- ❐ We are unprepared or unfamiliar with the subject.
- ❐ We are unusually nervous.

This disease comes in two varieties: the “repeating the same thing over and over again syndrome,” and the “complicating an idea to an extreme degree syndrome.”

No matter which strain you have, here are 10 remedies you may want to try.

**Remedy #1—** Finish early. Even if it means the meeting will end much sooner than scheduled. As Winston Churchill put it: “Say what you have to say and the first time you come to a sentence with a grammatical ending—sit down.” Unless you are being paid as a professional speaker, no one will mind that you ended early.

**Remedy #2—** Divide your presentation into sections based on the main ideas. Allot a specific amount of time to each section. Then monitor yourself while you practice and while you present. Unless the setting allows for questions throughout the meeting or program, stick to the timing you’ve decided on.

**Remedy #3—** Edit your notes with the goal of removing redundant words or phrases. Use a thesaurus to find new ways to describe your ideas.

**Remedy #4—** According to Thomas Jefferson, “The most valuable talent is that of never using two words when one will do.” Instead of saying “the door which you see indicated with a circle” just say, “the door with a circle” or “the door that’s circled.” Also, keep a check on the words you use. For instance, “methodology” is a five-syllable mouthful that can be replaced with the simple two-syllable word “method.” (Many words with logy as a suffix are four letters too long.)

**Remedy #5—** If you are unfamiliar with the topic, rambling repetitions won’t help. Say what you can and then cut it. If your audience is a small group of friends, it may help to explain your dilemma.

**Remedy #6—**Get to the point and then get off it. Every new idea doesn’t need a lengthy introduction. When you are changing the topic say “So much for _____. Now let’s look at _______.” or use some other fast and easy transition.

**Remedy #7—** When you plan to use a concluding summary (a final review of the main points), create a list to ensure you cover all the main points. But don’t include new topics—stick to the list and only go through it once.

**Remedy #8—** If you plan to use a progressive summary (reviewing the essential of each main point as it is considered), pause before beginning each summary. Don’t add new points. Remember, a summary is a condensed statement of the main points—not a new rendition of your previous speech.

**Remedy #9—** Avoid using phrases such as "once again," "as I've said earlier," "to repeat," and the ever-popular, "as you already know."

**Remedy #10—** This is the most important and potent remedy of all—take the time to prepare and practice.

## Getting Rid of Filler Words (e.g. umm, ahhh and okay)

How is your ahhhumokay addiction? Does your audience count the number of times you use filler words? Is there any word or phrase you use so often that it hurts your message? If so, here's how you can break this distracting habit:

**Admit your habit.** Listen to yourself on tape. Count the "filler words" you use. You might be shocked at what you hear, but relax, you're on the road to recovery.

**Pay attention to your everyday speech**. If you say "ahhh" while giving a presentation at a meeting, you probably say it when speaking informally.

**Use a reminder.** Tape a small letter "a" (or the first letter of the word you want to eliminate from your vocabulary) on your watch for a few weeks to remind you to avoid the word. If that's too unusual for you, at least post the word somewhere near your computer or phone.

**Flag filler words.** Give an informal speech to a friend and have him or her give you a signal every time you use the word.

**Practice pausing**. Often the reason we use filler words is because we haven't learned how to pause properly or we're afraid to pause. Pausing is a powerful way to improve your speech. Though a three or four second pause may seem endless to you as a presenter, it will seem natural to your listeners.

**Listen to other people**. Become a word filler fanatic for a few weeks. Notice how often other people use filler words instead of pauses.

## Gesturing—What To Do With Your Hands

Few aspects of delivery cause presenters more anguish than deciding what to do with their hands. "Should I clasp them behind my back? Let them hang at my sides? Put them in my pockets? Rest them on the lectern? And what about gesturing? When should I do that and—how?" Even people who normally use their hands wonderfully in everyday conversation seem to regard them as blocks of concrete when they stand before an audience.

**First off, relax, don't think about your hands too much.** Hand gestures are important—they add dimension or emphasis to your words—but there is no minimum quota of hand movements you must make before you've made enough. As Stephen E. Lucas puts it in *The Art of Public Speaking*: "Over the years, more nonsense has been written about gesturing than about any other aspect of speech delivery. Adroit gestures can add to the impact of a speech; but there is nothing to the popular notion that public speakers must have a vast repertoire of graceful gestures. Some accomplished speakers gesture frequently; others hardly at all."

**The best gestures come naturally.** Usually it's nervous energy that causes a person's hands to feel like awkward appendages they can't move smoothly. When they feel comfortable, most people are constantly gesturing while they talk. (The next time you're at a party notice how many hands are "flying all over the place.") However, once it's their turn to talk before an audience those same nimble hands dive for the nearest pocket, or hide behind a back.

**Gesturing tends to work itself out as you acquire experience and confidence.** There's nothing wrong with practicing in front of a mirror to improve your gestures. But the primary rule is this: Whatever gestures you make should not distract from your message. They should appear natural and spontaneous (even the ones you've developed during your practice sessions), help to clarity or reinforce your ideas, and be suited to the audience and occasion. Make sure your hands do not upstage your ideas. Practice at home, but when it's your turn to talk, think about communicating with your listeners, and your gestures will probably take care of themselves—just as they do in conversation.

# GESTURING

| Do | Don't |
|---|---|
| Observe & use gestures that come naturally.<br>Keep most of your gestures above the waist & directed outward for visibility and influence.<br>Punctuate key words and thoughts with gestures.<br>Use a variety of influential arm and hand positions, including one or two hands outstretched, palms facing upward or parallel to each other.<br>Use finger enumeration to designate points one, two, three, etc. | Move your arms wildly about.<br>Make a hand gesture with no purpose.<br>Repeat the same gesture over and over.<br>Fiddle with or wring your hands.<br>Keep your hands in any one tense position (like in your pockets) for more than a few moments.<br>Fold your hands over your crotch (known to speech coaches as the "fig-leaf position") or in any other embarrassing position. |

# How To Satisfy Your Audience with an Overhead Projector

Research has revealed that the most widely used visual aid in business presentations is the overhead projector.

Though the overhead is perhaps the easiest, most workable audio-visual aid, it is also the most misused. Three common abuses: 1) Text that is too small. 2) Jamming ten pounds of text on a one-ounce transparency and 3) Reading the text to the audience as if they were illiterate.

If you want to satisfy your audience with overhead transparencies:

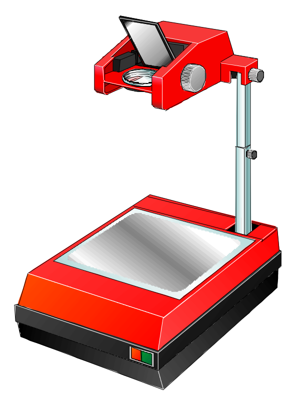
**Avoid distractions:** Turn off the projector if it will be several minutes before you use another transparency. (You don't need to flick the projector off and on between each overhead if you are only going to talk for a moment or two.) The noise of the projector and the projected image can become a distraction to your audience.

**Always face the audience:** When using any visual, avoid turning your back to the audience. When you need to move toward the overhead projector, back up while you are speaking. You are usually just a few steps away.

**Keep your transparencies simple:** One idea per overhead is usually best. If you are discussing four different sub-topics then you should have at least four overheads. The more you cram into an overhead the less likely it will be an effective visual aid. Rules which apply to every kind of visual aid: it should be large, clear, legible, and brief. If you can't read every word from the back of the room, don't use it.

**Don't play with the projector:** You should set the focus and angle of the projector before your audience arrives. (Place a quarter on the glass panel and adjust the focus until you can see the ridges along the coin.)

**Use color effectively:** Transparencies with colored backgrounds can reduce eyestrain and fatigue. Light, pastel colors work best because they do not diminish the clarity of the material you are presenting. If you have a color printer—then you can make dazzling overheads. But be careful, too much dazzle and the projection can become a kaleidoscope of confusion.



**Don't rush**: Give everyone time to see and understand the point you are highlighting. Place a transparency on the projector, pause and don't continue with your presentation until your audience has had time to read the visual.

**Put it in the corner:** Whenever possible, place the screen in the corner of the room, not in the center. For most people that means the left-hand corner, since this allows them to work at the projector with their right hand. This placement helps prevent you from blocking the image. It also allows you to face the audience.

# How To Control Your Nerves

"It's not the stage that frightens me—it's the audience." —Bob Orben

What is it about an audience that makes us nervous? Is our life in danger? No. Do we expect someone to stand up and scream our "let's lynch him," while the crowd becomes rabid with a blood lust all because we said something stupid? Hardly. (Especially when we're making a presentation to coworkers.) Probably the worst that could happen is that we bore our audience. Still, most everyone feels those pesky butterflies when they are about to "speak in public."

How can a presenter control his nervousness so that it is productive? First, don't fight it. As professional speaker Ron Hoff puts it: "You don't get anywhere by waging war against nervousness. It'll wear you down. Accept it as a positive influence. Then, like Sugar Ray Leonard, you finesse your way along—with a lot of technique and no small amount of self-assurance." In other words, don't get nervous about being nervous; it doesn't mean you won't give a great performance.

Another thing to keep in mind, that helps control nervousness, is the fact that we all appear much more confident than we feel. To check out the truth of that statement, ask a friend how you look and sound as you practice a speech or presentation, or as you give it in a real situation.

Poll after poll has put public speaking as a top-rated fear. Even the *Book of Lists* shows speaking in public as the number one fear in the world today. Pick up any publication on public speaking and you'll find a section on "stage fright." Indeed, if you allow it to overwhelm you, fear can ruin your style. On the other hand, get it under control and "stage fright" turns into positive energy that will put sparks into your words and add enthusiasm to your gestures. Stage fright isn't funny, but it is normal, natural, and even helpful—once you learn to use it to your advantage instead of your destruction.

Nervousness about speaking has two major components, both of which may seem to be outside your control. First, there is the physical aspect, stemming from the body's instinctive reaction to danger. In the so-called "fight-or-flight" response, the heart beats faster, the blood goes to vital organs rather than to extremities ("cold feet"), and you may sweat, blush, and so forth. Second, there is the psychological response to a feared event, which can provoke, maintain, and worsen the physical responses. You may forget even the simplest part of your presentation such as its title or even your company's name.

The following tips will help you overcome the physical responses to stage fright:

**Move around and warm up—**This releases nervous energy and restores a feeling of calm. If you are waiting in a hallway, take some large brisk steps. Do a few push-ups against the wall or stretch your arms up high above you several times. There is nothing silly about having a warm-up routine. Athletes warm up. Opera singers vocalize. Presenters, however, seem to do a lot of standing around before they perform. Use this time to prepare yourself physically for what can be an enormously demanding activity on both your body and your mind.

**Relax your body—**There are hundreds of different exercises you can do to relax your body. Most of them involve tightening and then relaxing various muscles. Dr. Boino Kiveloff of the New York Infirmary/Beekman Downtown Hospital has developed a daily exercise to help keep a person's blood pressure at a healthy level. He recommends doing it three time daily, but it can also help a presenter control nervousness.

1. Stand in a comfortable position with your arms hanging loose at your sides. Relax your elbows and knees and keep your hands unclenched.
2. Tighten every muscle in your body, either in unison or by groups. Still tensed, breathe normally and count aloud to six.
3. Relax your muscles and rest briefly.
4. Repeat the exercise two more times.

**Take several deep breaths—**This is perhaps the simplest, yet most effective way to clamp down on skyrocketing fear. A good approach is to breathe from the diaphragm in on a count of four, hold your breathe four counts and breathe out on the word "easy." This can be done while you're sitting in front of a room full of people!

The following tips will help you overcome the psychological responses to stage fright:

**Act confident—**To develop courage when you are facing an audience, act as if you already have it. Of course, unless you are prepared, all the acting in the world will be of little avail. But granted that you know what you are going to talk about, step out briskly and take a deep breath. This will reduce both the physical and psychological effects of fear.

According to the famed psychologist, Professor William James: "Action seems to follow feeling, but really action and feeling go together; and by regulating the action, which is under the more direct control of the will, we can indirectly regulate the feeling, which is not." Essentially, your body's actions deceive your brain into believing you feel courageous. But who cares about a little deception? If it works—it's worth using.

**Focus on your audience**—not yourself or the content of your presentation. This technique gets you to stop worrying about how you're doing. Also, your audience will sense that you care about their needs. These two factors will help change your nervousness into controlled energy. Try it and you'll see that it works.

**Play a tape in your mind**—So you have to give a brief presentation to a herd of managers. If it's perfect, what will it look like? Picture that. How would you sound? What would the result be? What kind of questions would you be asked? How much more money will you make when the managers realize you are a wonderful communicator? Don't think this is a fruitless practice in fantasy. Many amazingly successful presenters play a tape in their head that displays them as flawless speakers—before they get up and speak.

**Vocalize a few compliments**—Tell yourself you'll be a hit. Affirmations are really personal compliments. When you tell yourself that you'll look good and say the right things, you're complimenting yourself. Which is great! Mark Twain once said he could go all week on a single compliment. It doesn't mean you are an egotist. It means you want to do the best job you can and if a few personal compliments help you reach that goal, you'd be lax for not using them. Tell yourself (out loud) how energetic and clear your presentation will be. Then believe it.

**PREPARE, PREPARE and then PREPARE some more**—Even if you do all the neat stuff mentioned above, if you're not prepared, you'll probably be nervous. Ten pounds of affirmations and three hours of meditation won't make up for lack of preparation. So take the time to prepare. It shows in all different ways.

# Active Listening

Listening, at least listening with understanding, is more than just sitting back and letting words flow into your ears. It is an active skill, that when done well, can be harder than talking. There is no real communication unless the listener understands, accepts, and will do something based on what was said. So the listener has to take at least fifty percent of the responsibility for good communication.

Most of us are lousy listeners. We spend a third of each day in situations where we should be listening, but experts say we don't hear a quarter of what we should. Of the three levels of listening described below, only the first one contributes to effective communication. It's the one you should strive to master.

## Three Levels of Listening

### Level 1 Empathetic (Active) Listening

At this level, listeners refrain from judging the talker and place themselves in the other's position, attempting to see things from his or her point of view. Some characteristics of this level include being aware and in the present moment; acknowledging and responding; not letting yourself be distracted; paying attention to the speaker's total communication, including body language; being empathetic to the speaker's feelings and thoughts; and suspending your own thoughts and feelings to give attention solely to listening. This level of listening also requires that the listener show both verbally and physically that he or she is truly listening.

### Level 2 Hearing Words . . .

. . . but not really listening. At this level, people stay at the surface of the communication and do not understand the full meaning of what is being said. They try to hear what the speaker is saying but make little effort to understand the speaker's intent. Level 2 listeners tend to listen logically, being concerned about the obvious content. Level 2 listening can lead to dangerous misunderstanding because the listener is concentrating only slightly on what is said. At Level 3, it is usually obvious that the person is not listening; however, at Level 2 the speaker may be lulled into a false sense of being listened to and understood.

## Level 3 Listening in Spurts

At this level, listening means tuning in and tuning out, being somewhat aware of others, but mainly paying attention to oneself. One follows the discussion only enough to get a chance to talk. Level 3 listening is quiet, passive listening without responding. Often a person listening at this level is faking attention while thinking about unrelated matters, making judgments, forming rebuttals or advice, or preparing what he or she wants to say next. The listener may display a blank stare and is more interested in talking than listening.

Most of us listen at all three levels during the course of a day. However, our goal should be to listen at Level 1 in all situations. It takes practice and concentration, but it is worth it.

# Common Attributes of Active Listeners

## Active Listeners . . .

- ❒ look for an area of interest in the speaker's message; they viewed it as an opportunity to gather new and useful information.
- ❒ are aware of their personal biases and are better able to avoid making automatic judgments about the speaker.
- ❒ avoid being influenced by emotion-charged words.
- ❒ tend to listen to ideas, rather than specific facts in a message.
- ❒ use extra thought-time to anticipate the speaker's next statement.
- ❒ mentally summarize messages.
- ❒ ask questions to evaluate the message.
- ❒ consciously notice nonverbal cues.

## Questions to Keep In Mind While Listening

- ❒ What is the talker's intent—what does he or she want me to do?
- ❒ Am I listening actively—formulating my meaning and then checking back with the speaker to see if my meaning is his or her meaning?
- ❒ What information does the talker want me to have? What would be best for me to remember or take down?

- ❒ Am I resisting the feedback clues because I don't want to deal with the situation? If so, what can I do about it?
- ❒ Am I judging the talker? How is this affecting my interpretation of the message?
- ❒ What barriers might be at work distorting the message?
- ❒ What questions could I ask to verify my understanding and minimize the effect of barriers?
- ❒ What information is not being provided?

# Eleven Ways To Become an Active Listener

1 Make and maintain a commitment to listen and to understand what is being said.

2 Commit yourself to being perceived as a good (active) listener.

3 Maintain eye contact with the person speaking to you.

4 Don't play with keys, pens, or other objects.

5 Keep contact with the speaker instead of walking or turning away until the conversation is over.

6 Avoid excessive nodding or other body movements aimed to hurry up the conversation.

7 Try to reduce external distractions.

8 Don't cut the speaker off in mid-sentence.

9 Give verbal and nonverbal cues to show that you do or don't understand what the person is saying. (This means becoming a "whole body" listener.)

10 When possible and practical, take brief notes to aid your listening.

11 Ask questions which prove you are listening and which encourage the speaker to explain the topic in more detail.

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