

Confident, Concise Communication

By Nina Kraus, PhD, & Travis White-Schwoch

In a field that is about helping people communicate, audiologists and hearing health care professionals could do a better job communicating. How often have you gone to a conference or workshop to be confronted by presentation slides that were solid blocks of text, with the speaker dully reading from a lectern? Even worse, how often do you find yourself reading text on a slide that doesn't coincide with what the speaker is saying?

This month, we offer a practical guide to communicating science, based on our personal experience. While the emphasis is on conference presentations, many of these principles are widely applicable, including patient counseling or teaching. Unfortunately, presentation venues stack the deck against effective communication; it is the duty of the presenter/speaker to have a clear message and convey it successfully.

COMMUNICATE TO TEACH

Auditory learning relies on the integration of cognitive, sensorimotor, and reward networks (Kraus. *Trends Cogn Sci* 2015; 19[11]:642). How we think about something, how we perceive something, and how we feel about something influence how we learn that particular thing. So when trying to explain a complex concept, we need to think about how we can engage all these brain systems in our audience.

Triggering attention through a reward system boosts auditory learning (Kilgard. *Science* 1998;279[5357]:1714). Feeling a personal connection with the content is also helpful. After all, communicating is a two-way street. Even if we are not having a spoken dialogue with our audience, we should feel engaged with them. This will make our presentation memorable, and both emotionally and intellectually rewarding.

Make it a multimodal experience by integrating sounds, animations, and movement. Here are some action items:



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- Audiovisual integration boosts understanding. In the same way that hearing loss patients are counseled to exploit visual cues, listeners in a large lecture hall also benefit from visual reinforcement. Position yourself so the audience can see your lips move to improve clarity.
- Engage the audience through eye contact to personalize the experience and make people feel you are speaking directly to them. People want to see you; that's why they've come to your talk!
- We are hard-wired to notice novel things in our visual field. Move around, gesture, and be active to keep the focus on you. Body motions and judicious slide animations capture the audience's attention at key points. Speech rhythms and intonation provide a guiding structure to direct attention, which can be bolstered by hand and body movements.

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We are audiovisual learners, but only when the audio and visual complement each other. Align talking points with pictures because when auditory and visual stimuli compete, you are essentially forcing the audience to listen in noise. The cognitive load will be too large. Think about



Dr. Kraus, left, is a professor of Auditory Neuroscience at Northwestern University, investigating the neurobiology underlying speech and music perception and learning-associated brain plasticity. **Mr. White-Schwoch**, right, is a data analyst in the Auditory Neuroscience Laboratory (brainvolts.northwestern.edu), where he focuses on translational questions in speech, language, and hearing.

HEARING MATTERS

what you counsel patients on communicating in a noisy setting, and incorporate those strategies into your own presentation.

Action items:

- Request a lapel microphone so you aren't trapped behind a lectern and you can use your hands. Take that brave step beyond the lectern and keep the audience centered on you, directing them to the screen when appropriate.
- Set up your computer screen so it is in front of you. This may require bringing an extension cable. Some venues can set up a "confidence monitor" screen in front of you that mirrors the laptop.
- Don't make the audience look at your back! Your face conveys important rhythmic, visual, and emotional cues that support communication. Too often the focal point is a giant screen with the presenter out of eyeshot.

SIMPLE IS SOPHISTICATED

Sophisticated communication conveys ideas in the simplest terms possible. Boil ideas down to their cores, and use straightforward vocabulary and terminology. Restrict slides to keywords and pictures that are mental cues for your discussion. Analogies go a long way in explaining complex ideas; coming up with a solid analogy will help crystallize ideas for everyone. Build emotional checkpoints into the talk.

Think about what you counsel patients on communicating in a noisy setting, and incorporate those strategies into your own presentation.

Action items:

- When preparing presentation slides, reduce sentences to key points (for example, this bullet could read "Key points").
- Practice the talk out loud ahead of time. It is very different to think through a talk than it is to actually go through the motions of speaking. We know that auditory-motor integration pulls on more brain networks than simply imagining the words.
- Speaking will also take more time than thinking through the lines, so time the talk.

TELL A STORY

Capture your audience's attention and keep them along for the ride by forming a cogent story. The presentation should have a beginning, middle, and end, should have a relatable cast of characters, and should introduce your presentation's framework, approach, and core ideas. Open with a simple roadmap outlining what you will cover so your audience knows what to expect. End with a summary that aligns with

the roadmap. Explicitly connect the dots for your audience—don't assume they are making connections you make implicitly.

Action items:

- Create a roadmap.
- Identify two or three take-home points that can be conveyed as bullet points.
- If you have a section of your talk that doesn't fit into the roadmap, it probably doesn't belong in that talk.
- Be able to recount the message in a few sentences that might appear in an NPR story.

TAKE OWNERSHIP OF YOUR SPACE

Presentation venues stack the deck against effective communication. It is up to us to take ownership of our space. These days, conferences and classrooms are set up to prioritize looking at the screen, not the person presenting. Many venues have giant split screens that sometimes relegate the speaker behind a podium, hidden in the corner. So how will the audience pay attention?

The good news is that most conference organizers would be delighted to help you give the best presentation possible, even if that includes rearranging furniture or using additional devices to suite your needs. Providing advance notice is recommended.

Action items:

- Identify what you need in a presentation environment and outline your requests.
- If you will not be using your computer, send slideshow files to the organizer in advance to be sure they will work.
- On the day of the presentation, arrive at the venue early to become acclimated to the space and ensure everything is in order.

GIVE THE TALK YOU WOULD WANT TO HEAR

Your enthusiasm and passion can be infectious. Convey confidence and excitement in what you're talking about to reinforce the message and trigger the reward system. Even if you're shy, the excitement of the story helps override anxiety. It's about the message, not the speaker. The more effectively we can communicate, the more effectively we can help people communicate. [UJ](#)