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Lend Me Your Ears

All you need to know about making speeches and presentations

Professor Max Atkinson

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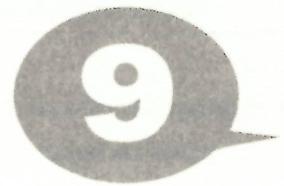


Putting it all Together

Structure and Preparation

The previous chapter showed how to put the principles described in Part III into practice to get political and business messages across, and the next chapter focuses on how to use them when making social and duty speeches. But it isn't just the structure of sentences that makes a big difference to the impact speakers have on audiences; the overall structure of the speech or presentation as a whole also plays a crucial part in the process. Without shape and careful planning, it is doomed to failure. If rhetorical techniques, imagery and anecdotes are to succeed in highlighting your main points, you need to create a coherent structure. This will not only help the audience to follow your thoughts and argument, but will also make it easier for you to stay on track and say the things you want to say – all of which applies to every kind of speech or presentation, whether in political, business, social or any other settings.

This chapter therefore outlines an approach to preparation that gets away from the assumption that it's enough simply to get some

slides together as a prelude to *ad-libbing* through a list of bullet points. Sometimes, people who have been used to this 'slides-first' method of preparation worry that any alternative approach will take far more time and effort than they have available. The approach taken here has been developed in direct response to such fears, and provides a systematic method of preparation that's specifically designed to enable you to plan well-structured presentations that will achieve maximum impact in a minimum amount of time. The many people who have tried it out over the years have found not only that it can be mastered very quickly, but also that it enables them to produce effective speeches and presentations much more quickly than they had previously thought possible.

It involves a seven-step process that not only helps with the creation of a tight, easy-to-follow sequence, but also prepares you for the moment when you deliver it:

1. Analysing the audience
2. Brainstorming the topic
3. Creating the structure
4. Saying it creatively
5. Creating the visual aids
6. Rehearsal
7. Preparing for question time (optional)

1. Analysing the audience

Although preparing a speech obviously involves planning what to say, it's useful to think of the process as one of planning listening time for your audience. Just as you would never plan a business meeting without thinking of your clients, you should also never

plan a speech or presentation without thinking about your audience. And, as was emphasised in earlier chapters, the capacity of an audience to remain attentive and to understand the points being made are things that can never be taken for granted. In particular, you need to take into account who is going to be in the audience, how many are going to be present and what kind of message is likely to be appropriate.

Who's in the audience?

A famous example of what can happen as a result of neglecting some or all of these considerations was a speech by Tony Blair to the annual conference of the Women's Institute in June 2000. An overtly political speech about the government's agenda was greeted by heckling and slow hand-clapping, with some members disapproving so strongly that they actually walked out. His main mistake was a failure to realise that the Women's Institute takes great pride in being a non-political organisation. Many of those in the audience were therefore annoyed that he had used their conference as a platform for making a party-political speech. Others objected to the fact that he spoke for much longer than the 20-minute slot he had been allocated.

Another case of a politician misreading his audience resulted in the only occasion on which I ever heard Paddy Ashdown being jeered during a leader's speech to a Liberal Democrat conference. What he (and those of us who had helped to write the speech) had forgotten was that the party's position on environmental issues meant that, in public at least, members are very keen on public transport, and very hostile towards private cars. He opened with a joke about something that had happened on the way there, and

began with the words, 'As I was driving to Nottingham...' His mistake was to use the word 'driving', which was enough to provoke boos and jeers from some sections of the audience – displays of disapproval that would almost certainly not have happened if he'd used some alternative form of words, such as, 'On the train to Nottingham ...' or 'On the way here ...'.

These failures to take the audience into account are in marked contrast to the experience of a group of directors who had to make presentations at a conference for the 200 most senior managers in the company. They had been so concerned by the negative audience ratings at the previous meeting that, in preparation for the next one, they commissioned a survey of their workforce to find out about their main priorities and concerns. Their presentations then dealt directly with the points raised in the survey, and were rewarded by vastly more positive ratings than at the previous year's conference.

These examples underline the importance of taking the composition and interests of your audience into account right from the start of the planning stage. Included in this should be an estimate of how much they are likely to know about the subject matter. The contents of a talk on nuclear energy will obviously be very different, depending on whether the audience is made up of physics graduates or of people who know little or nothing about science. When the choice is as stark as this, the problem of where to pitch the presentation is fairly easy to solve. More difficult is to know how to approach it if the audience is made up of a mixture of specialists and non-specialists. The safest solution is to pitch it towards the non-specialists, as the specialists in the audience will, like the speaker, be aware of the different levels of expertise among

those present. They are therefore likely to make allowances for a speaker's attempt to make things intelligible for everyone.

How big is the audience?

The bigger the audience, the greater the diversity of backgrounds and levels of knowledge will tend to be, which means that the anticipated size of an audience will have a bearing on the level at which the subject matter should be pitched: in general, the larger the audience, the simpler the content should be.

The numbers likely to be present will also have a bearing on other issues, such as what kinds of visual aids will be appropriate, and whether or not to rely on notes or to use a full script. With small audiences, it is rarely appropriate to read a speech verbatim from a text. But many speakers feel safer speaking from a text when addressing 50 or 100 people. When timing is of critical importance, a fully scripted speech also has the advantage of making it more likely that the presentation will end on time.

What message for this audience?

From listening to the comments of participants on training programmes, it would seem that many presentations in the business world are given every day with little or no thought being given to why they are being given in the first place. Indeed some people say that when they start to think seriously about what the point of many of their presentations is, they realise that it's often not at all clear, other than that they are simply part of the way things have always been done. To avoid such uncertainty, a final and crucial step in analysing the audience is to decide on the core message to be conveyed to this particular audience.

This involves you in being clear about two important points. First, what is the purpose of your talk? And second, what is the main message you want to get across to them? For example, you may want to show that management is caring, concerned and responsible, while delivering a difficult message about staff discipline. Or you may want to show that you're a forward-thinking, confident account manager, while talking about the year-end sales figures to a particular group of customers.

People often ask how many points per hour they should aim to get across. To this, the late Professor Sir Lawrence Bragg, who had an outstanding reputation for making scientific lectures accessible to lay audiences, had an interesting answer:

> I think the answer should be 'one'. If the average member of the audience can remember with interest and enthusiasm one main theme, the lecture has been a great success ... There should be one main theme, and all the subsidiary interesting points, experiments or demonstrations should be such that they remind the hearer of the theme. (*Advice to Lecturers: An Anthology taken from the writings of Michael Faraday and Lawrence Bragg*. London: Royal Institution, 1974.)

Winston Churchill expressed a similar view that echoes earlier discussions of the rule of three:

> If you have an important point to make, don't try to be subtle or clever. Use a pile driver. Hit the point once. Then come back and hit it again. Then hit it a third time with a tremendous whack. **Winston Churchill**

At first sight, these may seem to be excessively pessimistic views about how much can be conveyed in a lecture or speech. However, given the problems of audience attentiveness and understanding discussed earlier, the best we can probably ever hope for is that people will go away with a grasp of the main theme or gist of what we were talking about. This is why it's so important to be absolutely clear right from the start about what, if nothing else, you want this particular audience to take away with them at the end. This then makes it possible to set about preparing and structuring in a way that will make it more likely that you succeed in getting that central theme across.

A concrete example of learning this lesson the hard way comes from my experience of giving talks about my research into the techniques that trigger applause in political speeches. The first time I ever spoke on the subject in public was at an academic conference, at which I inflicted about 70 excerpts from speeches on the audience in the course of one hour. After giving similar talks to other audiences, it gradually dawned on me that, however many examples I used, and however intriguing the subtle variations and deviant cases might be, the gist of the argument that audiences were going away with was always the same, namely that applause was triggered by a small number of rhetorical techniques. So I decided that it would be more helpful to structure a presentation that would make it easy for them to get that particular point, rather than leaving them to infer the gist of the argument for themselves from an excessive number of examples. This eventually resulted in a presentation that uses three short video clips to illustrate each of the main techniques. Pared down to only 12 excerpts, there's no doubt that audiences get a

much clearer idea of what the techniques are and how to use them than in the days when examples were coming at them at a rate of more than one a minute.

2. Brainstorming

After analysing the audience, the next step in preparation is to think about the topics that might be relevant to getting your key message across to the target audience. This begins with a brainstorming exercise, which involves making a list of all the possible topics that might be included in the presentation. Once you have done this, there's a good chance that there will be far too much material, or that some of it may not be suitable for your target audience. So, in the interests of simplification and tailoring the material to your listeners, you can often start deleting some of the items straight away. As was noted in Chapter 3, one of the main problems for audiences is having to put up with speakers trying to get far too much information across in the time available. So you have to be prepared to cut your material to an extent that you may find quite painful.

Sectionalising

Brainstormed lists will typically consist of many more than the three or four sections that would make a suitable structure, so the next step is to organise the various items under a smaller number of headings. The way to do this is to go through the list with an eye to which items fit together, and which ones would be better placed in some other section. At the end of this stage, you should be left with a small number of main headings, with related topics listed under each one.

Sequencing

The order in which you write items down on a brainstormed list is likely to influence the order in which you put the different sections. But this won't necessarily be the best sequence for making sure that the key theme gets across to the audience. You therefore need to give careful thought to the order in which you are going to present each of the sections. For the audience to understand the first section, for example, it may be necessary for them to be familiar with the points made in the second one, in which case the order should obviously be reversed. Another section might involve drawing conclusions from all the others, in which case it should come last. In general, the aim should be to organise the various parts of the structure into a coherent argument that you can develop in logical steps throughout the course of the presentation. And it is particularly effective if the whole thing can be made to sound like a story with a clear moral at the end of it.

3. Creating a structure

A glance at almost any written document, whether a book, newspaper, letter or project proposal, is usually enough for us to get an initial understanding of its overall structure. Chapters, headlines, headings, paragraphs and lists of contents all help us to anticipate how the text is organised, and perhaps which sections to read carefully and which ones to skip.

Audiences too can make better sense of a presentation if they are clear from the start about what it is going to cover, and the order in which the different items will be dealt with. Having a sense of what to expect gives them a set of milestones that enables them to track where the talk has got to, and, importantly, to an-

ticipate when it is likely to finish. Without such guidelines, there is the awful prospect that it might go on for ever. The trouble is, of course, that members of an audience have no idea about how the contents of a talk are going to be organised, unless or until the speaker does something about it. This is no doubt why so many manuals and courses recommend what is sometimes referred to as the military model of structure, which instructs speakers to 'tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them; and then tell them what you told them'.

In effect, this is saying that there should be an introduction, a main body and a summary, which is certainly good advice as far as it goes. But experience suggests that, from an audience point of view, there are advantages in dividing presentations into a five-part structure, in which the introductory and concluding sections are divided into two:

- Pre-introduction
- Introduction
- Main body
- Summary
- Conclusion

The pre-introduction

If it's important for audiences to have a sense of what's to come, it's obviously crucial that they should be fully attentive at the point when you introduce your subject matter. Right at the start, however, you can't rely on audiences to be completely focused on what you are saying. They may still be rattling coffee cups, or chatting between themselves at the point when you start. In any event, it usually takes a few moments for them to adapt to a new

speaker, so the danger of launching straight into the introduction is that not everyone will have settled down enough to take it in. And, if they miss crucial information about the structure of what's to come, they may find the talk more difficult to follow later on. An effective pre-introduction therefore involves saying something that has no other purpose than to catch the attention of the audience and set the mood for what follows. Then, by the time you get to the introduction proper, there is a much greater chance of the audience paying full attention to it than if you had launched straight in with it during your first few words.

Pre-introductions provide considerable scope for creativity. Some of the examples from business presentations in the previous chapter were in fact pre-introductions. The contrast between two dates and two facts presents the audience with a stark fact aimed at getting their interest, while only hinting at what might be to follow:

> In 2000, IDT launched around 500 new products. By 2004, this number will have increased to a staggering 1,000 new products during the year.

Two of the puzzles were also pre-introductions designed to catch the audience's attention:

> I'd like to start by posing a question. Is there any point in being good at something if people don't know you're good at it?

> Money is like a sixth sense. Without it you can't make full use of the other five.

A suitable quotation, references to current affairs, something said by an earlier speaker or an anecdote can all be pressed into service to get the interest and attention of the audience. And, as was seen in Chapter 1, if an opening humorous remark prompts laughter, you can be sure that the audience will be listening closely to whatever you say next.

The introduction

Once you have successfully engaged the audience with a pre-introduction, you can safely proceed to outlining the sequence of topics to be covered. And the key words here are 'sequence' and 'outline'. The idea of sequence is important because the structure of a presentation refers to the order in which topics are dealt with and developed over a period of time. And the idea of an outline is important for the obvious reason that it's no use putting up a slide and announcing, as I have seen speakers do, that the presentation will deal with the list of 10 or 15 topics displayed on the screen. Audiences will simply recoil at the prospect of the massive overload of information about to be inflicted on them, and are likely to switch off even before the talk has got properly under way. For them to be able to grasp an overall sense of structure, you have to outline it as simply as possible, and describe it as clearly as possible. There is no hard and fast rule as to how many sections there should be, but experience suggests that many more than three or four will start to put a strain on the audience's ability to retain the overview for the duration of the talk.

The main body

You will already have put the topics into sections and the sections into a sequence during the Brainstorming phase. Most of the time spent on preparation will be devoted to getting the main body together, and it's useful to bear in mind that the various sections themselves, and especially the longer and more important ones, can benefit from having beginnings, middles and endings. Given that audiences cannot always be relied on to remember the overall structure for the entire duration of a presentation, they will welcome occasional reminders of 'where we've got so far', and the ground still to be covered. The use of signposts that point backwards to where we have been, and forwards to where we are going, not only helps the audience to keep on track, but also reminds the speaker to stick to the structure announced at the start.

The summary and conclusion

Just as it's important for a presentation to get off to a good start, so too can the way it ends have a critical impact on the audience. The trouble is that speakers often find it difficult to draw things to a close. Even though most people on our courses dread being asked to speak for five minutes, the fact is that very few actually stop speaking after five minutes. Even the repetition of promising indicators that the end is nigh, such as 'in conclusion ...', 'finally ...' and 'just before I finish ...', is no guarantee that they are about to stop. In one extreme case, the first 'finally' occurred more than 1,000 words before the end actually came.

This highlights a difficulty that relates to the earlier discussion of how speaking in public differs from speaking in the much

more familiar world of everyday conversation, where silences tend to be embarrassing and signals of impending trouble (see Chapter 2). In some situations, as with political or after-dinner speeches, there's a good chance that the silence at the end will be immediately filled by applause. But on most other occasions, you know that, as soon as you stop speaking, you'll be confronted by an uncomfortable and seemingly endless silence. However tempting it may be to try and keep that awful moment at bay by adding just a few more words (and a few more after that), the fact has to be faced that sooner or later you will have to stop speaking.

One step towards overcoming this problem is simply to be aware of it. Another is to have a clear strategy for bringing the talk to a decisive close. This is why it's useful to treat the end of a presentation as consisting of two distinct tasks. The first is the traditional 'tell them what you told them', or, in other words, a brief summary of the main point(s). The second is to draw out from that a concluding statement that encapsulates the key message that you had decided on much earlier when analysing the audience. Given that this is the last thing the audience will hear, every attempt should be made to package it in as punchy and memorable a way as possible – which can often be done by using the rhetorical toolkit described earlier (see Chapters 6–7).

Returning to base

One way of embarking on a closing sequence that can be very effective is to refer back to something you said during the introduction or pre-introduction. Doing this is a way of letting the audience know that the end is near in a less overt way than with lines that explicitly refer to structural elements, such as 'in

summary ...' or 'to summarise...'. At the same time, the link back to the opening theme or idea makes it appear that the presentation had an impressively rounded structure and had been well planned right from the start.

An example of this came in a speech by a company director at an annual conference for senior managers. He had started by saying that he was going to talk about the 'landscape of opportunity that lies ahead'. Towards the end, he began the summary by referring back to the same image, and developed it with a series of related metaphors:

Summary→
That's why I began by referring to what lies
ahead as a landscape of opportunity.
We've seen the main roads to success.
We know the pitfalls to be avoided
and we know the destination we want to reach.

Conclusion→ All that remains now is to make sure we
get there.

4. Saying it creatively

None of the above stages needs to take more than a few minutes, but will already have taken you a long way towards solving the problem of structure: what to say, the main headings under which to say it and the sequence in which they will be presented have all been decided on. In fact, if all you wanted to do were to give a slide-dependent presentation, the preparation process would be more or less complete at this point. Your only remaining task would be to load the main headings and subsidiary

bullet points on to slides for use as prompts during the presentation itself.

But there is another very important step for anyone who wants to have a more positive impact on the audience than presenters who follow the industry standard model. As was seen in the previous chapter, this involves going beyond deciding *what* to say, to work out *how* to say it in as effective a way as possible. It means looking for interesting ways to get the contents of each section across and making use of the tools of rhetoric and imagery whenever you can. Some topics may lend themselves to being illustrated by an anecdote; for others there may be an appropriate metaphor or analogy that can be brought into play; while yet other points may be expressed in terms of a contrast or three-part list (see also Chapter 8).

A commonly asked question is whether there are any guidelines as to how frequently to use these creative tools within a presentation, or any limit on how much they can or should be used. Experience suggests that there are no hard and fast rules, and that there is considerable variation between individuals in the extent to which they use rhetoric and imagery to package their messages. In general, however, the more such techniques feature in a presentation, the better the response from the audience. And, as was suggested earlier, they are particularly adaptable for use as pre-introductions, conclusions and for summarising the gist of one section before moving on to another.

Notes or script?

In Chapter 4, I pointed out that you shouldn't think that there is anything shameful or inadequate about being seen to use notes or a script. But, whichever you choose, it's very important that the

writing and layout should make it as easy as possible for you to lift the words from the text. Many people will have already experienced what can happen if you look down at print that's too small, handwriting that's barely legible or a mass of words that can't be read at a glance. It either results in panic and an *impromptu* decision to give up on using the notes altogether, or you become so preoccupied with getting safely to the next full stop that you come across as flat, monotonous and completely lacking in expression. As was touched on in the reference to the way Winston Churchill used to lay out his speeches (see Chapter 2), it's easy enough to avoid such problems. However, before looking at the solutions in a little more detail, we need to consider the question of whether a speaker should use a full script or rely on notes.

This issue has already been referred to in the earlier suggestion (page 283) about taking the number that will be present into account (Stage 1 of the process), where it was suggested that fully scripted presentations are usually more appropriate if the audience is going to be very large, or where timing is absolutely critical. Given that most speeches and presentations are to fairly small audiences, notes will usually be the most suitable *aide-mémoire* for the speaker. Some people, however, find it useful to write the whole thing out first, and then reduce it to shorthand headings for use when actually making the presentation. Others worry that, if they rely on notes, they won't be able to make much use of carefully phrased rhetorical lines, imagery or anecdotes.

The solution is to combine shorthand headings with fully scripted lines where they are needed. Luckily, however, people find that they don't have to do as much scripting as they expect when first setting out to incorporate rhetoric and imagery. For example,

in the case of anecdotes, metaphors and other forms of imagery, it isn't always necessary to write the whole thing out. A single written word or phrase is all you need to trigger the story or the image. Similarly, if a three-part list involves the repetition of phrases or clauses, ditto signs are more than enough for you to be able to deliver the lines with the originally intended level of accuracy.

Cards or paper?

Deciding whether to write notes on paper or cards can help to make things more convenient for the speaker. Paper is fine if there's going to be a lectern, or if you are sitting at a table and can glance down at the sheets laid out in front of you. But when there's no such support, sheets of paper tend to flap about, which risks distracting both audience and speaker. This is where the extra stiffness of cards comes into its own. For speakers who worry about what to do with their hands (see Chapter 11), the added advantage of cards is that having to hold on to them more or less solves the problem. As for what size of card to use, 10 centimetres by 15 seems to work best. Anything smaller and you'll find that you can't write very much on them, and the pack becomes so thick that it is cumbersome and difficult to handle. And, obvious though it may seem, clear numbering of the pages or cards is a crucial defence against disasters like dropping them on the floor.

Turning pages

When reading from loose sheets of paper, we naturally turn each page right over so that it ends up facing downwards. The only useful purpose this serves is to make sure that the pages of the document end up in the same order as they were at the start.

However, as we never have to repeat a speech or presentation as soon as it is finished, it doesn't really matter if they end up in the reverse order, as happens when each page is moved sideways on to a growing pile, rather than turned over. Doing this draws less attention to the fact that you're turning a page, and removes another potential source of distraction – which can become quite serious if a microphone picks up the noise of rustling paper and amplifies it around the conference hall.

It can also be unnecessarily distracting if you make a habit of dropping each card to the table as you finish with it. This is not only distracting in itself, but is also likely to encourage members of the audience to start monitoring the ever-diminishing number of cards in your hand. And once they get interested in working out how much longer you are going to take, their attention on the talk itself will be significantly diminished.

From the point of view of both speaker and audience, there is something to be said for starting each new topic on a new card or page. Television newsreaders routinely do this, even though everyone knows that they are actually reading from a teleprompter. For speakers, the practice makes it more likely that they will conclude the last topic and start the next one with different intonation. This, combined with the association of topic changes with page changes, provides an implicit signal to the audience that the talk is moving on to another section, making it easier for them to keep track of the structure as it unfolds.

Writing speeches

If you plan to write out the full text of a speech, it's extremely important to take into account the differences between the written

and spoken word examined in Chapter 3, and especially to make sure that you keep the sentences short. One reason why our written sentences tend to be longer than spoken ones probably comes from the convention of writing in paragraphs. This means that, apart from the first sentence which is indented, most of them start somewhere in the middle of a line. While writing or typing out the next words, it's therefore very easy to lose track of how long any current sentence is.

The solution is to stop arranging sentences in paragraphs, and to start each new sentence on a new line like this.

You'll then find it very easy to keep a continual check on the length of every sentence while you are writing it.

A useful guide is that the warning lights should go on whenever a sentence gets longer than about 16 words.

This is because the average length of sentences in speeches is around eight seconds.

At about 120 words per minute this comes to 16 words.

The important word here is *average*, as there will be some sentences made up of fewer than 16 words, and some of more.

If the continuous monitoring of sentence length is to become a matter of routine, it's a good idea to get into the habit of using the same-sized font.

Once you know where the words on the screen will be after 16 words, you will have a visual reminder of the point at which the sentence is in danger of becoming too long.

Starting each sentence on a new line not only enables you to monitor its length, but also makes its structure more visible than when the words are contained within a paragraph.

A particular word or phrase *might stand out as* being worth repeating.

It *might stand out as* a possible first part of a contrast.

Or it *might stand out as* a way of starting each item in a list of three.

Abandoning the paragraph is therefore one small step away from writing for the eyes of a reader, and a giant leap towards writing for the ears of an audience.

Speaker-friendly layout

Giving up writing in paragraphs is also important when it comes to laying out a script in a form that will make it as easy as possible for you to read a speech effectively from a text. Seeing a line at a time makes it easier to look down, pick up the whole or part of a sentence, look up and deliver it. This becomes even easier when the print is much larger than is usual in most written material –

though it's a mistake to think that typing the whole thing out in capital letters will help. Reading long sequences of words written in capitals is not something that we do very often, and there is evidence that people find them more difficult to read than words in lower-case letters. So the text of a speech, like that on road signs, will be much easier to read at a glance when printed in big lower-case letters.

The number of words on a line also has an effect on how easy it is to read from a text: the wider the line, the more difficult it becomes to scan it quickly. Just as the narrow columns of newspapers are easy to read, so too do narrow columns help to make life easier when reading a speech from a text. Like the choice of font size, the decision on column width will be very much a matter of personal preference, and it's a good idea to try out different options to discover which feels most comfortable. The following famous extract from a speech by Winston Churchill is a fairly typical example of a speaker-friendly script:

> We shall not fail or falter,
> we shall not weaken or tire.
> Neither the sudden shock of battle,
> nor the long-drawn trials of
> vigilance and exertion will
> wear us down.
> Give us the tools and
> we will finish the job.

As was mentioned in the earlier discussion of pausing and intonation (see Chapter 2), you can make things even easier for yourself by marking up the text in advance. Single vertical slashes can be pencilled in to indicate a short pause, or double slashes for a longer one. Alternatively, the text can be laid out with the end of each line being a place to pause. Words to be given extra stress can be underlined or highlighted with a marker pen. Entering simple mood descriptions in the margins, such as 'seriously', 'ironically', 'assertively', etc., can also provide effective reminders of changes in intonation and emphasis. Deciding on how to mark up a script depends, of course, on reading it aloud in order to try out what different alternatives sound like.

5. Creating the visual aids

The search for creative ways of getting points across is not confined to looking for opportunities to use rhetoric and imagery, but should also include thinking about what visual aids (if any) you are likely to need. Leaving the decision about these until this fairly late stage in the preparation process has two major advantages. The first is that you are likely to use far fewer visual aids than if you had opted for the traditional 'slides first' approach to preparation. The second is that the ones you do decide to use will be there to illustrate a particular point, rather than merely to remind you what to say next. Speakers who defer the decision about what visual aids to use until after they have got the basic structure together are therefore much less likely to make their audiences suffer from slide fatigue than those for whom the process of preparing a presentation stops as soon as a collection of slides has been filled with bullet points. Decisions about the selection and design of visual aids

should also be guided by the more detailed discussion of the subject in Chapters 4 and 5.

6. Rehearsal

Although no professional actor would dream of going on stage without extensive rehearsal, the remarkable fact is that most amateur speakers hardly ever take the trouble to rehearse their talks beforehand. And rehearsal doesn't simply mean reading silently through the notes or script to yourself, because this won't help you to discover how it works when spoken aloud. The importance of rehearsal is that it not only helps in estimating the timing of a speech or presentation, but also provides an opportunity to discover if any of it needs revising, something that's obviously better done in advance rather than finding out that you have to make changes during the actual presentation itself.

The more you go though something aloud, the more firmly fixed in your mind will the words become. It is not so much a matter of learning a speech off by heart as becoming so familiar with what comes next in the overall structure that you become confident speaking from the notes or script. And, if you can recruit other people to listen to you rehearsing, you can get the benefit of useful feedback on how the audience is likely to react. Failing that,

> Reading silently through the notes or script won't help you to discover how it sounds when spoken aloud. The importance of rehearsal is that it helps to fix the sequence in your mind, to estimate the timing and to find out if any of it needs revising.

audio and video recording makes it possible to watch and evaluate your own performances. I know of a number of people who, having discovered just how much their performance improves with rehearsal, will listen to themselves on a car cassette player on the way to work, make a mental note of things to be improved, record it again, and then listen to the revised version on the way home.

7. Preparing for question time

One of the reasons why Margaret Thatcher was not very keen on the idea of televising the proceedings of the House of Commons is said to have been that she didn't want the public to see that she used briefing notes during Prime Minister's Question Time – presumably on the grounds that they might be less impressed if they thought that answers to anticipated questions had been prepared in advance. Some years ago, an applicant for a place at an Oxford College dried up and went white in response to one of the questions he was asked during an interview. When pressed as to what the problem was, he blurted out that he'd never heard that particular one before. It transpired that successive generations of applicants from his school had been briefed to make a note of all the questions they could remember having been asked during their admissions interviews. These had accumulated into a huge database of questions that were most likely to be put to candidates for a place at that particular college, and equipped their teachers with a solid basis for coaching and rehearsing pupils before they went to Oxford for their interviews. Not surprisingly, applicants from the school in question had a higher than average acceptance rate at the college.

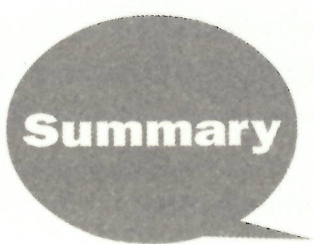
These two examples highlight the fact that it's not only perfectly possible to prepare yourself for answering questions, but

can also be very much to your advantage. And many speeches and presentations are, of course, routinely followed by a period of questioning. Quite often, as when a company is pitching for new business or you are applying for a job, the way you handle the questions can be at least as important as the presentation itself. Yet the curious fact is that most speakers spend far more time preparing what to say than preparing how to deal with the questions they will have to face at the end.

Anticipating and preparing for questions is a fairly straightforward business, and the following three-stage process has proved effective on numerous occasions. If possible, it's best to do it in a group: a few minds are always better than one, and are likely to generate more possibilities than when you try to do it on your own.

- ❑ Brainstorm to produce a list of all the possible questions that you think might be raised by this particular audience.
- ❑ Go through all the questions and work out the best possible way of answering each one.
- ❑ Having decided what to say, go one step further and think about *how* to get each point across in the most effective ways (using, wherever possible, all the techniques described in earlier chapters).

There is no rehearsal stage in this list, because it's not always as helpful as it is when preparing the presentation itself. Audiences tend not to be very impressed by answers that come across as too rehearsed. This means that, if you practise at all, the main challenge is to make your replies sound as though they are completely spontaneous and off the cuff.



This method of preparation consists of a seven-step process:

1. Analysing the audience

- ❑ Who's in the audience?
- ❑ How big is it going to be?
- ❑ What message is for this audience?

2. Brainstorming

- ❑ *Subjects:* Make a list of all the possible topics that could be included.
- ❑ *Sectionalising:* Put the topics into sections.
- ❑ *Sequencing:* Reorder the sections into a logical sequence.

3. Creating a structure

Aim for a structure consisting of five main parts:

- ❑ Pre-introduction
- ❑ Introduction
- ❑ Main body
- ❑ Summary
- ❑ Conclusion

4. Saying it creatively

Having decided what to say, go on to work out how to put your points across in the most effective way (see Chapters 6–8).

5. Creating the visual aids

Decide on whether you need any visual aids, and if so what would be most suitable (see Chapters 4 and 5).

6. Rehearsal

Go through the whole thing, saying it out aloud. If possible, record it, and/or get others to listen to it and give you feedback.

7. Preparing for question time (optional)

Take some time to anticipate possible questions and work out how best to answer them should they arise.