



Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Teaching Center

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The Do's and Don't's of Effective Lectures

Public speaking is at the top of almost every Top 10 list of American phobias. But effective lecturing is not genetically determined like eye color or a receding hairline. The most common reason for bad lecturing isn't phobia; it's that professors don't value the craft enough to hone their skills.

The face-to-face lecture is the basic mode of communication in the academy. At most universities, 25 percent of intro classes have more than 125 students. As long as universities use the assembly line model of instructor, lecturing will be central to the educational process. And lecturing is also the key to successful conference presentations.

How Can You Make Your Lectures Memorable?

In general, students capture only 20-40 percent of a lecture's main ideas in their notes. After three weeks, most students remember less than 10 percent of what was said in the lecture.

- So what can you do to guarantee that students learn and remember what we teach?
- How can you create and deliver lectures that stay with students long past the last few minutes of class?

Step 1. You need to capture the listeners' attention.

We orient our attention selectively. Other things are always competing for our attention.

So how do you do this? You can use attention grabbing gimmicks.

Open with a provocative question, startling statement, unusual analogy, striking example, personal anecdote, dramatic contrast, powerful quote, short questionnaire, demonstration, or mention of a recent news event.

But you don't need to be a performer or entertainer or comedian. You need to focus listeners' attention. You can do this by focusing on particular questions or problems.

Step 2. Listeners need to organize the material into a coherent structure or framework.

Otherwise, your listeners will be overwhelmed. Students need to absorb, record, and understand the steady flow of auditory and visual information.

Because the content is new to students, it can be difficult for them to identify which ideas are critical and which are peripheral.

How can you help students attend to the most important information, so that they understand and remember the key points of each lecture?

The solution is to make your lecture's organization explicit and to provide listeners with a conceptual framework, so that they can direct their attention to the most important information.

1. Provide a roadmap

Describes your lecture's objectives and the questions you will consider

2. Provide a conceptual framework for understanding the material.

Step 3. Don't overload your listeners

Listeners are not sponges and cannot immediately "absorb" new information. Give your listeners short breaks throughout lecture to review their notes and ask questions. Short breaks will revitalize the audience's attention.

Step 4. Give your listeners opportunities to review and apply what they are learning.

You can have students tackle the problem or issue in pairs at the end of the lecture, or work alone and then vote on a solution or position. You can also create a think-tank situation by inviting volunteers to talk through their thought processes as they try to solve the problem or respond to a question.

Ask students at the end of class to write down the three most important things that they learned.

How to Prepare a Successful Lecture

Lecturing is so central to the academy that it's a form of masochism and sadism not become good at it. Here are some simple rules that will make sure your lectures are successful.

Rule 1: Lectures must begin with an attention grabber.

You might lead off with a news story; a paradox; a provocative problem; an illustration; a cartoon

Rule 2: Lectures should have clear objectives.

Ask yourself: What precisely do you want your students to come away with?
What do you want them to know? What skills do you want them to acquire?

Rule 3: Don't be boring.

Talk to your audience, not to the screen or the blackboard. Give your audience "roadmap" (an overview or outline) of your talk near the beginning. Make your talk interesting with good examples, relevant anecdotes, and significant details.

Rule 4: Lectures must be interactive.

Since the attention span of almost all listeners is between 10 and 15 minutes, you can expect to lose most of your audience if you lecture for 50 minutes straight.

How can you make your lectures more interactivity? By taking activity breaks.

These can be simple: You can ask a question or pose a problem. Or you can ask your students to turn to a classmate to discuss a question. Or consider using a visual aid: An illustration or a film clip. A case study can really enhance a lecture.

Rule 5: Lectures must not repeat the textbook or outside reading.

Rule 6: Effective lecturers present material in multiple ways.

You might make a point abstractly, then provide a concrete example, and then visualize the point.

Rule 7: Monitor student learning

It is really important to make sure that students understand what you are teaching. Watch your audience's body language. Learn to recognize the symptoms of "eyes glazing over" when students are becoming passive recipients rather than active participants. That may signal the time for one of your prepared anecdotes, or better, for a task for students to tackle.

Practical Tips

Not long ago, educated people studied rhetoric and oratory. No longer. And it shows.

1. Find your voice

There is no one correct way to teach. Don't feel that you must emulate your own professors. Maybe you can't tell jokes. Or you don't have a booming voice. Or you don't feel comfortable speaking extemporaneously. Your teaching style needs to reflect your personality.

2. Don't be boring

3. Identify questions that the lecture will address.

Share these questions with your audience.

4. Give lectures that are easy to outline

Let your audience know what you are going to talk about and why. This is your "battle plan." By laying out exactly what you are going to do, you eliminate a lot of listener confusion. You don't want your audience to spend an hour wondering: Why is the speaker talking about that?

5. Don't just use the transmit-receive model.

Variety is the spice of life in lectures

6. Minimizing mental lapses during lectures

Audiences frequently get lost during lectures. They suffer four kinds of listening lapses:

1. Short term memory overload: (Too much information in too short a time to adequately process).
2. Momentary misunderstandings: (temporary confusions).
3. Translation troubles: (The audience has to translate what you are saying into concepts and language that it understands).
4. Sidetracks (The listeners become distracted).

How can you minimize mental lapses?

1. Pause periodically.
2. Use the blackboard
3. Use demonstrations and dramatic devices

A fifty or eighty minute lecture needs to be interrupted every fifteen minutes or so with a "different" type of activity. Incorporate changes of pace and shifts in focus to reawaken listeners' interest

Demonstrations and dramatic devices will greatly increase student attention, interest, understanding and learning.

7. Integrate active learning into lectures.

1. Ask your audience to select the best response to a question.
2. Ask the listeners to identify an error.
3. Ask them to complete a sentence.
4. Ask them to support a statement.
5. Ask them to reorder the steps in an argument
6. Ask them to rephrase an idea

Visuals

Don't turn your lectures into PowerPoint shows. Visuals can reinforce essential points. But visuals can also be deadly. This is especially true of PowerPoint. So beware PowerPoint's perils:

1. PowerPoint is inflexible.
2. PowerPoint is a crutch.
3. PowerPoint is boring.
4. PowerPoint distracts listeners. Why should they listen to you when they can read your slides?

Follow the Zen of PowerPoint:

1. Less is more. Use PowerPoint slides only when necessary:

- Turn off the projector at appropriate times.
 - Don't use too many slides.
 - Avoid complete sentences
2. Use PowerPoint strategically
- To preview your main points
 - To illustrate things too difficult to draw on the board
 - To illustrate important concepts

Quick and Easy Ideas for Better Lectures

Bad lecturers violate nearly every rule of good communication. They're disorganized. They never vary their pace or pitch. They either stare at their notes or ignore them altogether and ramble onto whatever topic comes to mind. They never make eye contact with their audience. They never, ever show the slightest bit of life when discussing the very subject that supposedly excites them.

So follow good communication practices.

1. Don't be defensive. Project confidence.

2. Never, ever, ever interrupt your lecture to say, "I'm going to skip some pages here in the interest of time,"
Write your lecture to fill the allotted time. A 20 minute talk is ten pages long. It's never 35 pages long.

3. Convey your enthusiasm for the material.

4. Don't talk into your notes

Look at your audience frequently and remember to smile. If you read your lecture, your audience will wander off.

5. Use concrete, simple language.

Avoid jargon and unnecessary qualifiers.

6. Keep your audience engaged.

Make your lecture as interactive as possible.

The Formula for Success

There is a simple formula for effective lectures:

1. Explicitly state your objectives

You explain why are you giving the lecture and the major points that you want to get across.

You tell your audience where you're headed. This need be no more complex than "Today I want us to consider..." or, "The major thesis of today's lecture is...."

Remember: People hear quite differently than they read. Distill your intentions to essential points.

2. Work from a written plan.

It can be as elaborate as a verbatim script — as long as you don't read it — or as spare as a bullet-point outline on a note card, but map out where you want to go and the route you'll take to get there.

The real skill in lecturing is how well you assemble and organize material, not how arcane, esoteric, or exhaustive it is.

3. *Make your points in multiple ways.*

Reinforcement is basic to learning. An effective tactic is to step back and ask:

“Why am I telling you this?”

“What’s the point here?”

Or, better yet, “How can we use this?”

4. *Conclude with a forceful summary*

At the end of the lecture restate, in capsule form, the major points you’ve covered.

The Secrets of Becoming an Effective Lecturer

If you asked students to re-design Dante’s inferno, the worst punishment in hell would be to listen to lectures for all eternity. The sad fact is that a sizable number of students lapse into instant narcosis the moment their professors take the podium.

Why? Too often, lectures are boring. They seem irrelevant. The objectives aren’t clear. Students want classes to be stimulating, substantive, entertaining, interactive, not boring

Yet lectures can be a highly efficient and effective way to teach. Often, it is discussions, not lectures, that are the least useful class sessions. An effective lecture is filled with intellectual excitement.

1. *Provide students with a framework for each lecture*

- Aim for three to five main points in each lecture.
- Begin the lecture with a high-level question that the upcoming information can answer.
- Prepare a handout of the lecture’s main points.
- During lecture, be explicit about what students should focus on.

2. *Don't overload students*

- Give students short breaks throughout lecture to review their notes and ask questions.
- Include a formal activity or assignment after every 15-20 minutes of presentation.
- Don't use too many different types of presentation materials at once.
- Don't give students two conflicting things to attend to at the same time.

3. *Students are also more likely to remember information that relates to ideas or experiences they are already familiar with.*

- Use examples from student life, current events, or popular culture.
- Ask students to generate their own examples from personal experience.
- Tell students how new information relates to previous lectures in your course.
- Show students how specific skills can be applied to real-world problems.
- Create activities and assignments that ask students to fit new information into the overall themes of the course.

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- *prepare effective cover letters, teaching and research statements, fellowship applications, and job talks*
- *deal with anxiety, challenges to your authority, and other classroom issues*
- *design innovative courses*
- *deliver scintillating, substantive lectures and lead stimulating, successful discussions and labs*
- *respond appropriately and effectively to shy, withdrawn, disgruntled, or disruptive students*
- *use technology more imaginatively*

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