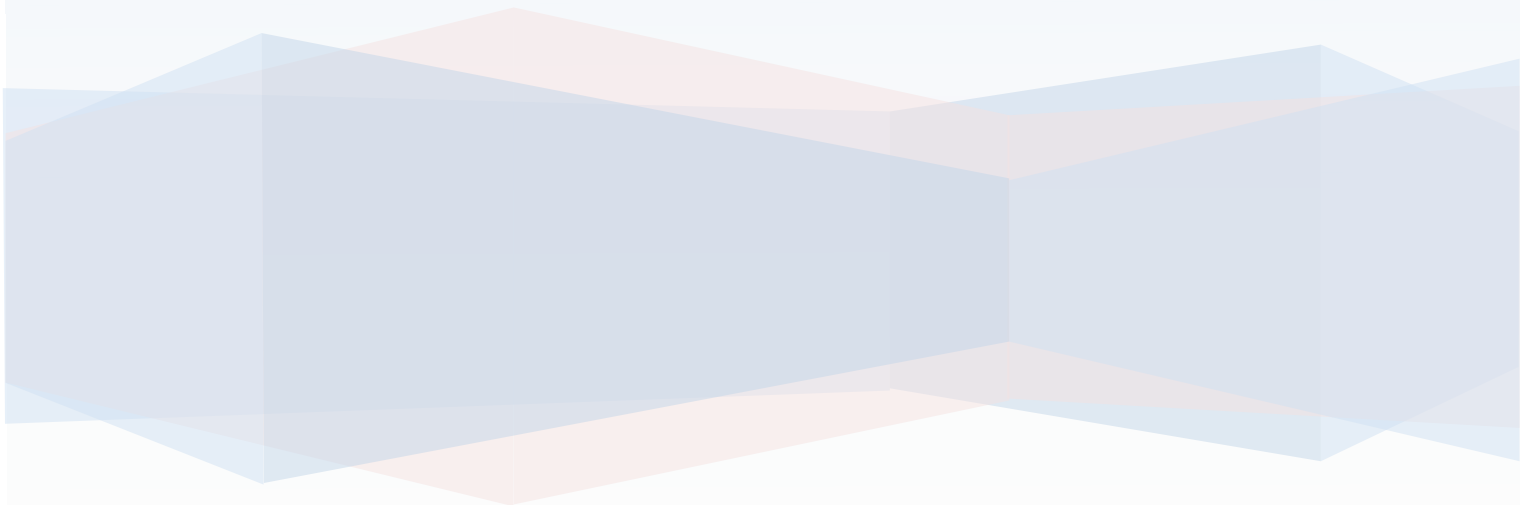


# Public Speaking

## A Brief Guide to Effective Practice

John Meany and Kate Shuster



Individuals communicate to make sense of the world; they share messages to create meaning and to affect others. Successful oral and nonverbal communication will produce and transmit meanings, reduce misunderstandings, and influence the attitudes and behaviors of message recipients. Communication is more than just an exchange of information between a speaker and a listener. Communication is a complex process that is affected by a host of environmental and other factors. If an audience is uncomfortably hot, for example, they may not be able to concentrate on a presentation of a particular message. If a speaker constantly flails her arms about while speaking, it may distract or frighten the audience to such an extent that they are unable to recall the message. Although an individual may not be able to effectively manage the weather, it is possible to learn to effectively manage presentation skills so as to efficiently and persuasively communicate a message.

Many speakers assume that if their content is substantive, then the presentation will be exemplary. This assumption is usually incorrect – to be persuasive, a speaker must present an idea with authority and credibility. Content is a necessary to effective communication but it is generally insufficient to successfully influence an audience. Effective speakers learn to present information in clear, entertaining, and inclusive ways. They use multiple reasoning and persuasive techniques to ensure that messages are received. The purpose of this brief guide to public speaking is to describe some of these techniques and make suggestions for practice.

A dynamic speaker must construct authoritative appeals through sophisticated and organized arguments, delivered in a confident, vivid, and articulate manner. This requires research and organizational skills, application of effective vocal delivery and nonverbal communication techniques, as well as good audience analysis and practice.

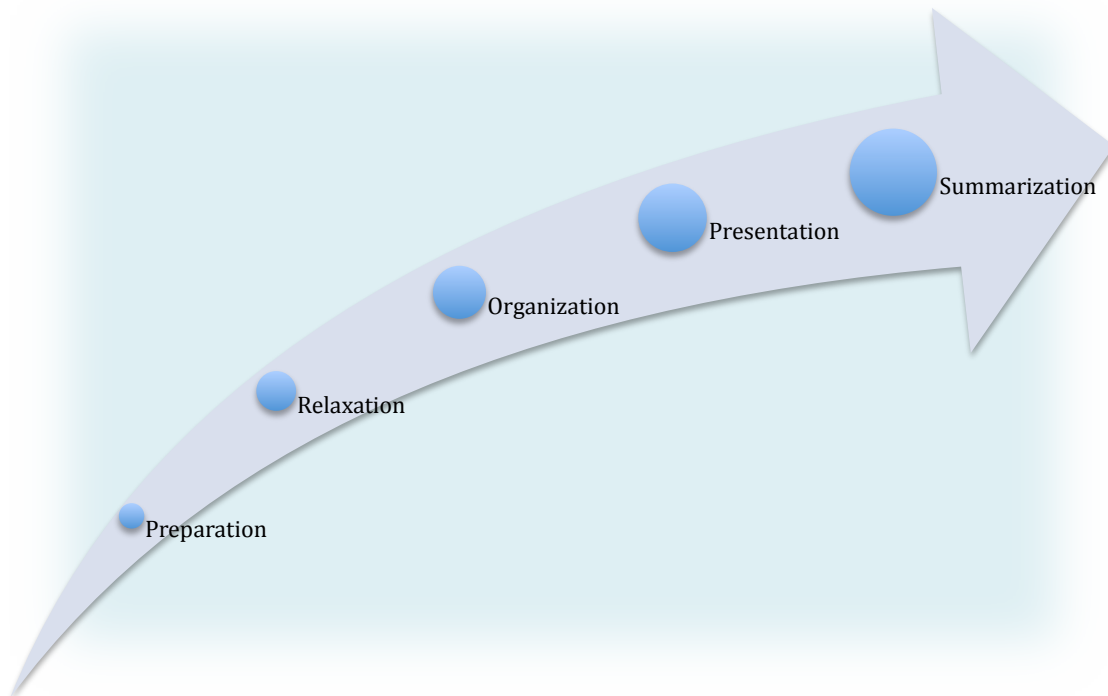
Good public speakers have many common habits but there is no “best” method for delivering a speech. Differences among talented speakers are acceptable and inevitable. Effective oral performance may embrace quite distinct, natural, individual styles. This means that what makes one person a good public speaker may not be the same method that works for others.

Those learning effective public speaking should approach it just as they would any other new, primarily mechanical, skill – identify strengths and weaknesses, then work on honing presentation skills through diligent practice. There are many methods that purport to cure nervousness or other speaking anxieties, but no method works as well as simple practice.

To construct any presentation, you may use the **PROPS** method. This method emphasizes five major elements of effective oral presentations:

**Preparation    Relaxation    Organization    Presentation    Summarization**

# THE PROPS METHOD



## PREPARATION

Preparation substantially improves oral performance. While most speaking is in an impromptu (spontaneous) or extemporaneous (limited preparation), from time to time one has the luxury of preparing for a specific presentation. The best way to prepare is to have a clear sense of purpose and then construct a research and organizational strategy to fulfill that purpose.

Initially, the speaker should consider the objective of the presentation. *What is the purpose of the speech? What is it that the speaker must accomplish?* Usually, a speaker should be able to sum up the purpose of the speech in a sentence. A speech might have any of the following purposes:

- To analyze the accounting issues of business expansion to another country
- To assess the performance of colleagues on a project
- To present a section of a corporate annual report to select shareholders
- To summarize the effect of changes in federal tax law
- To persuade decision-makers of the need for industry consolidation
- To explain innovative techniques for determining the financial worth of a company

All of these statements of purpose take the basic form “to inform someone about something/to move someone to action.” The utility in forming such a statement of purpose is that it will help target the message accordingly. Many speakers make the mistake of trying to fit too much into a relatively brief presentation. Audiences respond differently to orally communicated messages than they do to messages that they read. It is difficult for even the best trained, most alert audience member to recall all of the information that one may present. This is one of the reasons that it is important to have a sense of purpose for a speech. What message should the audience take from the speech? A presentation should be prepared to accomplish that goal, to maximize the reception of that particular message.

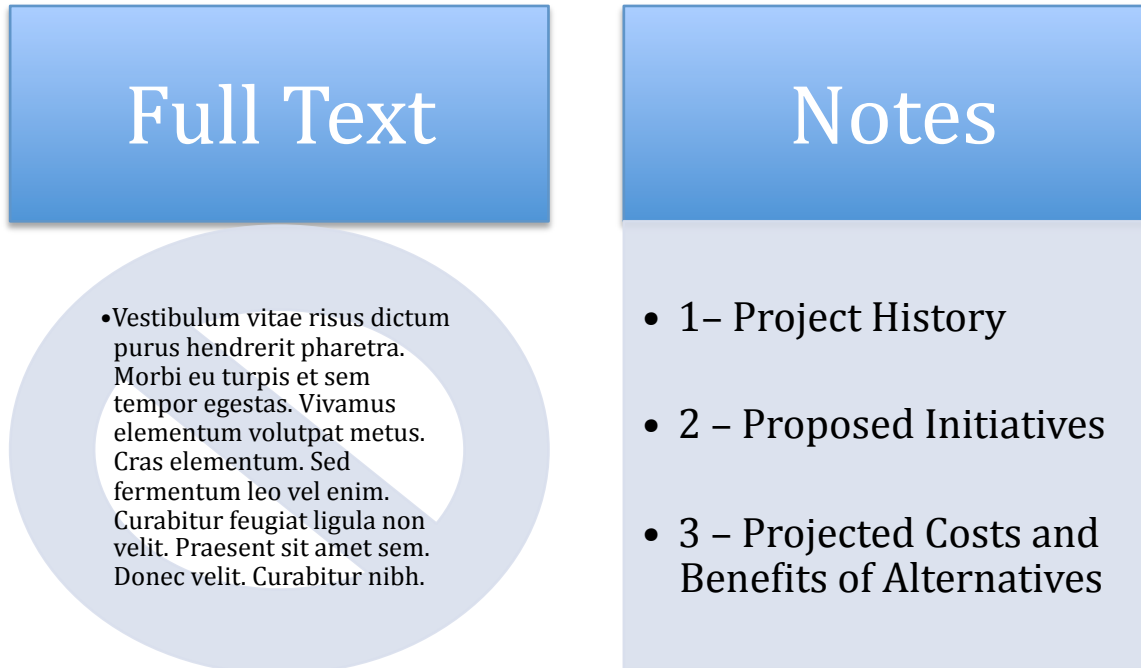
The statement of purpose recognizes that the audience is an engaged participant in the communication process. An effective presentation is not merely a display of information in the abstract; rather, there is a specific context for information – the speaker uses it to inform *this* person or *this* group of people for *this* particular purpose. Each audience poses challenges and opportunities for the well-prepared speaker. A speaker must anticipate and address the audience’s reaction to a message.

Preparation includes topic-based research. Research must be credible enough to convince a skeptical or challenging audience. An effective public speaker should critically evaluate topic literature before an address. An examination of relevant print and electronic materials, financial reports and business records, government documents, and personal interviews will provide authoritative information for the body of the speech. In addition, command of the relevant facts helps reduce anxiety regarding the presentation. One may research a presentation as for an academic paper or other document; although there are clearly many differences between successful paper writing and effective presentations.

In addition to preparing the speech itself, a speaker ought to anticipate questions from the audience and prepare answers prior to an event. Argument anticipation is a relatively simple technique. The speaker should imagine the questions that an audience might ask about the presentation and then ask the following: “What will I say then?” This exercise should be repeated for the speaker’s answers to each question until the speaker is satisfied that she is capable of addressing appropriate initial and follow-up questions.

Once the speech has been prepared and audience reaction has been taken into account, a speaker must consider the use of notes. Some speakers make the mistake of writing the entire speech as a manuscript and then subsequently reading the manuscript to an audience. Unless the presenter will be using a TelePrompter or is prepared to memorize almost the entire script, this strategy will probably not work. Audiences dislike being read to. They are generally bored or unimpressed by presenters who read from their notes or are overly dependent on a script. This practice ultimately transfers credibility and substance to the document and away from the speaker. If a speaker wants to impress the audience, she should give some thought to constructing notes that will (in the parlance of theatre) *cue* the speaker rather than *feed* the lines. One effective way to construct usable notes is to write a manuscript and then condense that manuscript into an outline. The

outline may then be put on note cards and used to cue the elements of the speech, to recall the previously written text.



To be effective, a speaker must practice the presentation. Public speaking is more a mechanical skill and sign of mechanical intelligence. The completion of a speech manuscript or note card outline is rarely sufficient for an effective presentation, even for a confident speaker. It is good practice to prepare the speech text and practice well in advance of the event. This will allow the presenter to make any edits or adjust to other changes. A speech should be practiced aloud. It is better to practice for a live audience or have a videotaped presentation for review. Time the speech. Make the presentation work in the allotted time.

## RELAXATION

All speakers, regardless of experience, are excited or nervous prior to a public presentation. Some, however, are more nervous than others. An increased heart rate, dry mouth, shaking hands, and other subtle physical signals of anxiety are normal and expected. To feel more at ease, a speaker should use relaxation techniques to reduce tension caused by public performance.

If possible, a presenter should visit the speaking venue prior to an event. A mental image of the site will enhance visualization of the performance during rehearsals and other practice sessions and subsequently reduce concerns about the actual event. Additionally, speakers should dress comfortably and appropriately. The more a speaker naturally ‘fits’ the event, the more likely it is that she will be relaxed. Before a speech, a presenter

should drink water (avoid other beverages prior to public speaking events, as most interfere with vocalization.) A speaker should emphasize the positive in advanced preparation and avoid negative associations and thoughts. For example, rather than dwell on a potential poor performance, it is better to focus on superior knowledge of the material to help generate energy and confidence.

Foolish advice is routinely dispensed to nervous public speakers. They are exhorted to visualize the audience in their underwear or to carry various totems of luck to the presentation site. None of these techniques works as well as advanced practice and simple breathing exercises. To reduce blood pressure and calm nerves, a speaker should breathe deeply and completely throughout your presentation. Prior to the presentation, breathing practice can be particularly helpful for confidence and relaxation. One can take several deep breaths immediately prior to a delivery. The speaker should inhale (through the nose) for a count of three; hold for a count of three; release (through the mouth) for a count of three; and relax for count of three. This cycle is repeated for several rounds to produce a calming effect.

## ORGANIZATION

A speaker must develop organizational patterns for a presentation. Well-organized speakers typically use a narrative structure – an introduction, main body, and conclusion. A speech introduction must grab the attention of the listeners. The opening of the presentation should immediately engage the audience and draw them into the speech. This is accomplished with a dramatic anecdote, surprising factual material, or humor. The introduction should establish the significance of the speech. *Why should the audience listen?* An effective oral presentation ought to be able to explain the reasons that the subject matters to an individual (qualitative dimension) and how the issues affect a number of people (quantitative dimension).

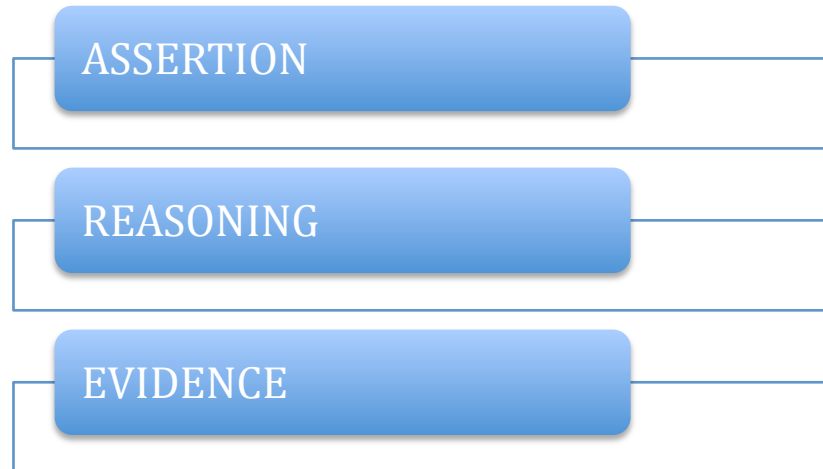
The speaker should begin to establish her/his credibility in the introduction. *Why is the speaker qualified to give the speech? Is there some special knowledge or experience that establishes the speaker's competence? Does the speaker identify with the audience in terms of a shared background, social concerns, or cultural or personal values?*

At the end of the introduction, the speaker should provide a thesis or topic statement for the presentation – a single declarative statement emphasizing the purpose of the speech. In addition, the speaker should preview or highlight the major elements of the presentation for the audience.

The body of the speech ought to contain several major issues supporting the thesis statement. An effective presentation involves a limited number of issues but includes the more salient and significant ones. A speaker must not try to address every potential issue related to main topic. A speech is not like an academic paper or business report. If the audience becomes confused during the speech, it will not have a chance to re-read the section that it found confusing. A presenter must be conscious of shepherding the audience through the speech with care. The body of the speech should be argumentative –

the speaker should use reasoned discourse to convince and move the audience. The A-R-E format (assertion-reasoning-evidence) is appropriate for the construction of major arguments. Each idea ought to have a highlighted, concise, claim (an opinion or assertion). The speaker's reasoning or analysis of the claim follows. Finally, the speaker should use expert testimony, statistical information, contemporary and historical examples, personal experience, or other evidence to buttress reasoning.

## *The Elements of an Argument*



An effective presenter should prepare and rehearse appropriate transitions between the major and minor points of the speech. The audience will become lost or confused if the speaker jumps between points without warning or explanation. Unfortunately, once an audience is confused or distracted, it is quite difficult to get them back as active listeners. Thus, it is the speaker's mission to find ways to keep the audience interested and engaged throughout the speech. Humor, surprise, novelty, and critical insight can ensure that the audience will continue to listen.

The conclusion of the speech should effectively summarize the main ideas of the presentation, suggesting that the speaker accomplished the goal or purpose of the presentation. The conclusion should include a dramatic or meaningful message for the audience to remember the performance.

## **PRESENTATION**

The delivery of a message directly affects how that message will be perceived, or whether it will be perceived at all. Effective public speakers are generally clear without being didactic, emphatic without being hyperkinetic, and charming without being sleazy. Everyone has a different speaking or presentation style – there is no one, best method to communicate a message. There are, however, many ineffective ways to communicate a point. Presentation causes the most nervousness among beginning public speakers, and perhaps for good reason. When nervous or unprepared, speakers often betray anxieties

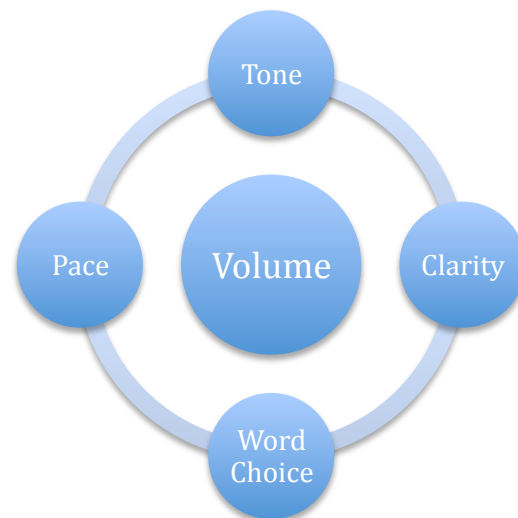
through a series of physical or verbal “tells” which indirectly communicate insecurity and anxiety to the audience.

Sustained practice is really the only way to fine-tune presentation skills. Fortunately, a little practice goes a long way – once a person becomes aware of a bad presentation habit, it becomes relatively easy to fix. The problem that most speakers have is that they are simply not aware of their own ineffective presentation habits. It is strongly recommended that speakers videotape themselves so that they can critically diagnose and repair presentation issues.

Each speaker should be mindful of the key techniques of oral and nonverbal communication. Outstanding vocal delivery includes appropriate volume, pace, tone, clarity, and word choice. Speakers should avoid fillers (“you know, umm, whatever”). These fillers, known as *vocalized pauses*, are what is said when a speaker does not know what she is going to say next. It is much better to simply pause than it is to have a vocalized pause.

## Verbal Communication Skills

The verbal presentation of a message, the speaker’s vocal delivery, will influence how the message is heard. In other words, there is no ability to persuade another person of an opinion if it is not presented clearly and confidently.





### ***Volume***

Speakers should deliver a speech at the appropriate volume. It should not be too soft – the audience should be able to hear the speech without straining to listen. It should not be too loud – no audience enjoys having a speaker YELL AN OPINION AT THEM! Slightly louder than a normal conversational volume is generally best, but a speaker must consider the acoustics of the room. Slightly louder volume is associated with credibility and confidence.

### ***Pace***

The rate of delivery is the speed or pace of a speech. For maximum effectiveness, a speaker's rate of delivery should be subtly faster than the normal conversational rate for that speaker. This produces an active listening audience. At all times, the rate of delivery should not interfere with the clarity of the presentation. Jumbled words and phrases cannot effectively communicate an idea to an audience. It is a better idea to improve your word economy or make better strategic and tactical decisions about issues to include and exclude than it is to deliver a speech at a rate that cannot communicate important information.

### ***Clarity***

People pay closer attention to what and how a speaker says something in a more formal presentation or more professional setting. By emphasizing articulation, a speaker is more likely to avoid miscommunication or potential distractions from mispronunciation.

*Effective techniques for pronunciation practice require that practice saying unusual or difficult words and phrases.* Here are sample exercises to reduce speaking errors. More are available online.

#### **Letter Groups**

Slowly repeat each of the following letter groups:

www, www, www, www, wdw, wdw,  
www, www, www, wtw, wtw, wtw,  
www

#### **Tongue Twisters**

Speaking slightly faster than conversational rate of delivery, repeat each of the following tongue twisters three or four times:

- Three free throws
- Unique New York
- Mrs. Smith's Fish Sauce Shop
- Lovely lemon liniment

#### **Similarities**

Speak each pair of similarly sounding words. Make sure that any listener can clearly hear the differences in the words.

- |    |       |      |
|----|-------|------|
| 1. | ferry | very |
| 2. | late  | lake |
| 3. | said  | sad  |
| 4. | dad   | dab  |
| 5. | not   | note |

### ***Tone***

Not all words in a speech should be emphasized in an equal way. This eliminates voice modulation and produces a monotonous delivery. A good public speaker should focus the listener's attention on the specific words of an oral presentation that have more drama, meaning, substance, power, or imagery. The speaker should alter the pitch or tone of her voice to emphasize those key words and phrases.

### ***Word Choice***

Although some words may generally mean the same thing as other words, an effective public speaker carefully selects the appropriate word for the most accurate and persuasive description. Successful professionals develop a vocabulary and use vivid and powerful images to describe your ideas. They integrate field specific jargon and appropriate terms of art without losing the substantive detail necessary for descriptive expression. Select persuasive words can make a speech sound more convincing. These terms are often repeated in advertisements to persuade consumers – *act, adopt, avoid, best, collapse, compare, connect, crisis, deliver, deny, discover, duty, efficient, focus, forward, freedom, guarantee, identity, immediate, implement, improve, innovate, justice, key, liberty, lifesaving, manage, mobilize, overcome, patriotism, plan, prevent, progress, protection, responsibility, security, simplify, solve, suddenly, superior, tradition, triumph, truth, ultimate, urgent*. In addition to individual words, some phrases can also help convince an audience. Here are some popular and effective persuasive phrases: *as the evidence shows, at last, call to action, important development, last chance, new technique, now is the time, on the brink*.

In addition to appropriate use of descriptive and powerful language, it is effective to use good word economy. This means that a speaker should use a minimum of words to express exactly what it is that she means. Effective speakers are concise and to the point. This immediately rewards the audience for paying close attention and helps them to retain the messages being presented.

## **Nonverbal Communication Skills**

Nonverbal communication is an important, perhaps the most important, element of a persuasive delivery. People do not only communicate with their voices. The human body and presentation visual and audio aids are also vital tools for communication. Eye contact with the full audience, physical positioning at the center of the audience's line-of-sight, and appropriate use of gestures and facial expressions can animate a presentation and enhance speaker credibility.

Eye contact is the single most effective nonverbal communication tool. It intimately connects individual over a distance and establishes a personal connection with audience members. It is essential to a successful presentation. Gestures with the hand, head, and facial expressions may be used throughout a presentation but sparingly. Physical movement should be planned and loosely choreographed – a speaker should make deliberate movements that support and emphasize and never distract from the message. In

general, a speaker should not hold a pen or other object in your hand while speaking. Props can add to a presentation but are also distracting. They should be used with care. There is more information in the *Brief Guide to Integrating Visual and Audio Presentational Aids in Oral Communication*.

The best advice for a speaker is BE YOURSELF, ONLY MORE SO. The audience will catch on if the presenter is affecting a persona. Professional speakers embrace the spotlight and willingly ‘perform’ for the audience. With practice, one can learn to amplify their individual voice and develop a unique and appealing style to effectively deliver different kinds of presentations in diverse settings for different audiences.

## **SUMMARIZATION**

A public presentation should be considered as an opening for discussion and networking, rather than a conclusion to professional contact. To advance an engaging discussion, speakers should invite questions and comments during and after a presentation. If appropriate for the setting, speakers should prepare an evaluation for an audience or solicit other performance feedback. Speakers should additionally prepare a rigorous self-evaluation as soon as possible after a performance. This step of the PROPS method is important for the future development of a speaker. If a person strives to someday deliver effortless performances to wide (or even moderate) acclaim, she must take seriously the business of self-evaluation and third party assessment. Of course, a presenter should always have personal contact information and handouts (presentation summaries, notes, white papers, reports, bibliographies, facts on file, links to online resources, etc.) available for audience members.