Characteristics of an Effective Delivery

Introduction:

I. **Attention Getter:** Jason had spent two weeks researching and outlining his informative speech about hybrid cars. His formal outline and reference page were carefully organized, and the content of his speech was well developed with a variety of support. He thought he was prepared...until he started to deliver his speech to the class. He tried to make eye contact, but realized he didn’t know it well enough. His hands started shaking, so he grasped his note cards with both hands and read the rest of his speech to the class.

II. **Speaker Credibility:** During the 15 years I’ve been teaching public speaking, I have witnessed many students like Jason receive a “C” on a speech that was well researched and organized but poorly delivered. Delivery, as defined in Sellnow’s 2005 text, is the way you communicate orally and visually through your voice, face and body (2005).

III. **Listener Relevance Link:** According to Sellnow, many beginning speakers neglect practicing delivery. Yet research shows that listeners are more influenced by delivery than by the content of the speech, and approximately 60 to 90% of meaning is conveyed through delivery (2005).

IV. **Thesis:** Today I’d like to explain three key aspects of an effective extemporaneous delivery style.

V. **Preview:** First, I’ll discuss vocal characteristics and then physical and facial characteristics.

Body:

I. To begin, Lucas, in his 2009 text, says an extemporaneous method of delivery is “a carefully prepared and rehearsed speech that is presented from a brief set of notes” (p. 247). In order
to be effective in your delivery style, let’s first consider vocal delivery. Beebe & Beebe, authors of *The Public Speaking Handbook*, claim that a speaker has two vocal obligations: “Speak to be understood, and speak with vocal variety to maintain interest” (2010, p. 301).

A. Being understood includes volume, articulation, pronunciation and dialect (2010).

1. Volume refers to how loudly or softly you speak.
   a. Speakers must be loud enough for everyone in the room to hear you without straining.
   b. That doesn’t mean being so loud it hurts anyone’s ears. You’ll want to strive for varying your volume.
   c. Make sure you are breathing deeply from your diaphragm in order to project.

2. Articulation is how clearly you say your words.
   a. Often, nervous speakers tend to deliver their speech very quickly, and thus end up slurring or mumbling their words.
   b. I also notice some students who simply don’t move their mouths and faces enough (due to nerves or laziness) to let the sound out clearly.
   c. To improve your articulation, there are several activities you can do.
      i. Make sure you speak slowly enough so we can clearly make out every word.
      ii. Taping your speech will help you identify some common errors in articulation, such as “wanna” instead of “want to” or “I dunno” for “I don’t know” (Lucas, 2009, p. 253).
      iii. Before delivering their speeches, I encourage students to say “aluminum, linoleum” several times while over-enunciating.
3. While articulation refers to how clearly you enunciate your words, pronunciation is how the sounds of the words are said and where they are stressed. Mispronouncing a word can reduce your credibility and intelligibility.
   a. Former President Bush was often criticized for the way he pronounced “nucular.”
   b. Besides “nuclear,” other words frequently mispronounce are “libary,” instead of “library” or “February” instead of “February.”
   c. If you aren’t sure how to pronounce a word, look it up in the dictionary.
      i. If you absolutely can’t find how to pronounce a name, Grice and Skinner suggest deciding on a “reasonable pronunciation” and then practice saying it aloud with confidence (2010, p. 235).
      ii. I wasn’t sure how to say Grice’s name, but if I mispronounce it confidently, even Grice himself may believe I’m saying it correctly.

4. Besides volume, articulation and pronunciation, your dialect, based on regional or ethnic speech patterns, can impact how well your audience understands you.
   a. There isn’t one right or superior dialect; they are all simply different.
   b. Many of my students resented the dialect used by the characters in the 1996 movie Fargo.
      i. We may not like to admit it, but some Midwesterners do sound that way to others.
      ii. V.P. candidate Sarah Palin’s Alaskan accent was often confused with a Midwestern dialect.
iii. To illustrate what that dialect sounds like, let’s watch a short clip from a 2008 YouTube video called “Sarah Palin Meets Fargo” (Miller, 2008).

c. If Frances McDormand came to speak to our class and used that same dialect that she used in the movie, however, we would have cause to be offended because then it would appear she was mocking us or making fun of us.

B. The second goal of vocal delivery is to speak with vocal variety, varying your pitch, rate and pauses.

1. Pitch is how high or low your voice is.
   a. Lucas states that Inflection is when you change your pitch, causing it to be more interesting to listen to (2009).
   b. We’ve all heard monotone speakers and know how boring they can be.
   c. Taping yourself will often help you identify patterns with pitch.
      i. Work on bringing your pitch up, down, or the same, though avoid being too sing-songy.
      ii. Also avoid letting your pitch get too high, causing you to sound nervous, or raising your pitch at the end of your sentences, causing you to sound unsure of yourself.

2. Rate, the speed at which you speak, is another vocal characteristic that should be varied.
   a. Most Americans talk at a rate between 125 and 190 words per minute, according to Grice and Skinner. When students speak too slowly, they can be perceived as dull or boring (2010).
b. In my experience, many beginning speakers deliver their speeches way too fast, flying through it at the speed of light.

c. The key is to concentrate on having a conversation with your audience.
   i. When explaining a complex concept, slow down to help your audience understand it better.
   ii. On the other hand, it’s normal to speak faster when describing something exciting.

d. Again, taping yourself will help you identify problem areas with rate.

e. Writing cues on your note cards will remind you when to slow down or speed up.

3. Other cues I write on my note cards are slash marks for when and for how long I should pause.
   a. Pauses or silences remind you to slow down and breathe.
   b. They can also give the audience time to reflect on what you’ve said.
   c. Try to note how and when I use pauses during this presentation.

Transition: Now that you understand the characteristics of an effective vocal delivery, let’s examine the elements of your physical delivery.

II. Physical characteristics include appearance, gestures, body movement, and posture.

   A. Whether or not it should, research shows a speaker’s personal appearance and attire may impact how the audience responds to your speech.

   1. Your attire is usually dependent on audience and occasion.
      a. If you’re giving a toast after your best friend’s wedding, most likely you’d be part of the wedding party and would be dressed formally.
b. When delivering your informative speech in a college classroom, however, I don’t expect you to wear a tux or gown. I do recommend that you dress slightly more formally than your audience.
   i. How do most college students dress when they go to class? Most wear jeans, a t-shirt, and tennis shoes.
   ii. If you’re going to be slightly more formal, you may want to wear khakis and a button down shirt. Look at these two students. (Show pictures). Which one appears more confident and put together?
   iii. I also recommend that you double check your appearance before class. Even though I’ve been teaching for over 20 years, I still look in a mirror before class. It makes me feel more confident.

2. In addition to audience and occasion, consider your topic and purpose.
   a. For example, if you’re demonstrating the basic poses used in yoga, it would be appropriate to dress in active wear.
   b. If, however, you are persuading an audience to consider cremation over burial, you would probably want to dress in darker, more formal clothing.
   c. Further, if you feel especially anxious, consider dressing to disguise any physical signs.
      i. When I get nervous, my legs shake, so I usually try to wear loser fitting pants or a longer skirt, so the audience can’t tell.
      ii. Several of us with a fair complexion often blush when we feel anxious, so wearing a button-down shirt can cover that up.

3. A final note about appearance: It’s best to avoid extremes.
a. Several years ago, a young woman in my class, in an attempt to convince us to invest in the stock market, gave her persuasive speech in a skirt and matching suit jacket.

b. The problem? Her skirt was so short, several audience members had difficulty making eye contact with her.

B. Another physical characteristic that can strengthen your delivery is by using gestures.

1. Gestures should be used to emphasize or reinforce your verbal message. Sellnow offers three reasons to gesture:
   a. To emphasize an important point
   b. To clarify structure
   c. To reference presentational aids (2005).

2. Gestures will be more effective if they are natural and relaxed.
   a. Gestures should be above your waist.
   b. Make sure your gestures are consistent with the verbal message.
   c. When you’re done gesturing or if you aren’t gesturing, try to keep one hand relaxed by your side rather than holding your note cards with both hands.

3. To keep gestures natural, I encourage students to warm up physically, by doing simple activities such as shaking out their arms.

C. Body movement, a third physical characteristic to consider when delivering your speech, is usually accompanied with gestures.

1. Any movement you make during your speech must be purposeful; otherwise, it can be distracting.
   a. Some speakers show their anxiety by shifting around or moving frequently.
b. I encourage students to practice relaxation techniques before giving their speech to calm them down.

2. Movement can be used to transition into a new point or to change from a serious point to a lighter one (Beebe & Beebe, 2010).

3. Movement can also help you establish immediacy with your audience, so consider standing or moving closer to your listeners or moving from behind a lectern (2010).

D. Finally, your posture, or the way you carry yourself, can impact your physical delivery. While I don’t expect rigidity, avoid looking sloppy.

1. Avoid slouching or leaning on the lectern or off to one side. (Demonstrate).

2. Keep your weight evenly distributed (no shifting or standing on one leg, or doing weird things with your feet) and hold your body still (no swaying).

3. Practicing in front of a mirror can help you identify some distracting mannerisms.

Transition: Physical nonverbal delivery also includes facial characteristics, including facial expressions and eye contact.

III. According to Grice and Skinner, humans use anywhere from 5,000 to 250,000 facial expressions (2010). With all those possibilities, I am amazed by how many students rarely use any when they deliver their speeches!

A. Facial expressions can help express your thoughts, emotions and attitudes throughout your speech (Beebe & Beebe, 2010). No matter how nervous you may be, don’t ever show it (or say it!).

1. For instance, if you lose your place in your speech, making a face can reduce your credibility.

   a. The facial expressions I often see are of fear, panic, or apathy.
b. If you don’t show or admit that you’re nervous, the audience probably won’t even know.

2. Instead, try to show pleasant, friendly facial expressions when it’s appropriate during your speech. I love when students smile (unless it’s a fake, cheesy one)!

3. Concentrate on what you are trying to convey to your audience, and keep your facial expressions consistent with your verbal message.
   a. If you’re informing us about sex trafficking in Darfur, your face should convey the seriousness of the topic.
   b. But if you’re presenting the “Best Roommate Award” for your special occasion speech, you might convey pride, joy, or humor.

B. While facial expressions are important, your eyes communicate more than any of your other facial features (Grice & Skinner, 2010).

1. Sellnow suggests that speakers make eye contact with every person in the audience throughout 90% of their speech (2005).

2. Look your audience members directly in the eye, not at the floor, the wall above them, or out the window, focusing on everyone, rather than just one side of the room, your friends, or the instructor.
   a. One suggestion is to look in three directions; those in front of you, those to the left, and those to the right.
   b. Rather than sweeping the audience, sustain eye contact with one person, before moving onto another.
   c. Sustaining eye contact in some cultures may be perceived as rude or offensive, so make sure you’ve analyzed your audience.
3. Finally, in order to make eye contact throughout 90% of your speech, you need to finish researching and outlining early enough so you have several days to practice delivery.
   a. That doesn’t mean you memorize your speech, though.
   b. It means that you know it well enough so you aren’t reading from your notes, just glancing at them, while talking with your audience.
   c. When preparing for this speech, I read the formal outline many times until I felt confident with the material. Then I created my speaking outline (note cards), practicing with them for several more days and writing cues on them, such as the one that tells me to slow down before my conclusion.

Conclusion:

I. **Thesis Restatement:** Today I illustrated three key aspects of an effective extemporaneous delivery style.

II. **Summary:** I explained vocal, physical and facial characteristics.

III. **Clincher:** After writing his persuasive speech, Jason spent four days practicing his speech aloud in front of a mirror or to his roommates. When it was his turn to deliver his speech in class, he made eye contact with his audience, paused, and then confidently delivered a speech worthy of receiving an “A.”
References


