

1. Talk rather than read. You'll be easier to understand, and you'll be better able to make genuine contact with your audience. Furthermore, talking will help you think more clearly by forcing you to communicate your points in ordinary language. There's nothing virtuous about perfect grammar, complicated sentences, and sophisticated vocabulary if your audience can't follow you.

2. Stand up. This is advisable for two reasons. First, people can see you better. Second, standing puts you in a physically dominant position. This sounds politically incorrect, but in this context it isn't. Remember: you're the focus. The audience needs your help to maintain their attention. They want you to be in charge. By standing up, you accept this invitation -- making both your job and theirs a little easier.

3. Use visual aids. This is one of the most important principles of public speaking. People are visual creatures. The old saying "a picture is worth a thousand words" is especially apropos in the context of a conference talk, where you don't have time to say very much.

At a minimum, display an outline of your talk. Some people seem to think they're giving everything away by showing people what they're going to say before they've said it. But the effect of a good talk outline is exactly the opposite: it makes your audience want to hear the details. At the same time, it helps them understand the structure of your thinking. Talk outlines should be extremely concise and visually uncluttered. 12-15 lines of text per slide is plenty.

4. Move around. It's easier to keep focused on someone who's moving than on a motionless talking head. Hand gestures are also good. It's possible to overuse these devices, of course. Simply crossing from one side of the room to the other every three or four minutes is probably enough.

5. Vary the pitch of your voice. Monotones are sleep-inducing. Since it's possible to speak in a lively, animated manner without changing pitch, many people don't realize they have this problem. Get a trusted friend or colleague to listen to your delivery and give you honest feedback. (This is an important principle in itself.) Even better, tape or videotape yourself and check out how you sound.

6. Speak loudly, clearly, and confidently. Face the audience. An important element of vocal technique is to focus on the bottom (the deepest pitch) of your vocal range, which is its loudest and most authoritative tone. (This can be especially important for women.) Speak from the gut, not the throat. Breathe deeply – it's necessary for volume. Don't be afraid to ask for feedback: "Can you hear me at the back of the room?" Be careful, when using visual aids, that you continue to face the audience when you speak.

7. Make eye contact with the audience. If this is anxiety-inducing, at least pretend to do this by casting your gaze toward the back and sides of the room. Be careful not to ignore one side of the audience. Many speakers “side” unconsciously, looking always to the left or to the right half, or only to the front or the back, of the room. Here's another place where feedback, either from friends or from videotape, can be helpful.

8. Focus on main arguments. Especially in a conference situation, where talks are short and yours is one of many, your audience is not going to remember the details of your evidence. In such a situation, less is more. Give them short, striking “punch lines” that they’ll remember. They can always read your written work later, but if you don’t get them interested and show them why it’s important, they won’t want to. A good rule of thumb is to make no more than three main points in any given talk. That’s about all most people will be able to remember.

9. Finish your talk within the time limit. Not to do so is disrespectful both of any subsequent speakers and of your audience. Most people’s maximum attention span is 40-45 minutes. If you exceed this limit, you’ll probably lose them.

The only way to be certain you can keep within your limits is to rehearse your talk. After lots of experience, some people can gauge talk times accurately without this. But nothing is more embarrassing -- for both you and your audience -- than getting only halfway through before hitting the time limit. One trick is to develop a standard format for your talk outlines, then learn how long it usually takes you to talk about each slide. My own rule of thumb is five minutes per outline slide.

10. Summarize your talk at the beginning and again at the end. “Tell ‘em what you’re gonna tell ‘em, tell ‘em, and tell ‘em what you told ‘em”: this ancient principle still holds. If you follow this rule, your audience is much more likely to remember your main points. Even more important, it helps you stay focused on the key ideas you're trying to convey.

11. Notice your audience and respond to their needs. If people seem to be falling asleep, or getting restless or distracted, the problem may not be you. Is the room too hot, or too cold? Too dark? Can people see you? Is the microphone on? Is something outside the room distracting people? Don’t hesitate to stop briefly in order to solve these problems. Ask someone in the audience to open a window. Whatever the case, notice what’s happening and use it as feedback. If you can't figure out why your audience is responding poorly, ask somebody later and fix the problem next time.