



## Improving Your Speaking Skills: The Common Sense Factor

By Stephen D. Boyd, Ph. D., CSP

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*Have you ever been appalled at watching a sales presentation in which the presenter was chewing gum? It happens, as do other gaffes that you'd think common sense would eliminate. This article gives you tips and reminders on making common sense work for you in your presentations, from the obvious to more delicate matters you might not have considered.*

Alan Alda, in his autobiography "Never Have Your Dog Stuffed," tells the story of speaking to the Illinois State Legislature. He was asked to say a few words and did not consider the fact that many in his audience did not support his position on the Equal Rights Amendment. Even the consultant he was working with, told him absolutely not to talk about the ERA.

He got carried away and did not read his audience well; he got off his topic and on to the ERA. His listeners began heckling him so much that the consultant crawled on her hands and knees to a place behind the podium, pulled on his pant leg to get his attention, and said, "Let's get out of here!" He was not using common sense; his passion for his topic blinded him to the reality of the speaking situation.

### **Common Sense is Not Optional**

You can obey the laws of the road and still not be a careful driver. For example, looking down the road in front of you to anticipate danger is common sense. Just looking at the rear of the car in front of you and not paying attention to traffic patterns down the road shows lack of common sense. So it is in speaking. You can follow the rules of speaking and still not be effective if you leave out common sense.

Often what makes a presentation – sales or otherwise – successful is not a specific skill, but rather simple common sense. I've seen speakers do some very inappropriate things during a speech. These have nothing to do with content or delivery, but affect their credibility and the quality of their presentations.

### **No Apologies**

For example, telling an audience as you start that you did not have much time for preparation is, unfortunately, common. That statement is an insult to the audience. You are saying, "I did not think enough of you to prepare adequately."

Don't tell us about your lack of preparation; we'll find that out soon enough. And if the audience cannot tell, then you're that much better off.



## **Unbelievable Goofs**

I've seen speakers who chew gum as they speak. If you need to freshen your breath, take a mint so you won't have to remember to get rid of it before you speak. Enough said!

Some speakers are completely unfamiliar with how to handle a simple slide presentation as they speak. Common sense says that if you do not know how to develop and use a PowerPoint slide presentation, then don't use one.

Here are some suggestions for incorporating the common sense factor to ensure your success when speaking.

## **Anticipate the Speaking Situation**

Anticipate the speaking situation. Visualize the speaking room, the location in relation to where you are, and the audience you anticipate. Doing this will help you make good choices about what time to leave, in order to arrive without hurrying. Visualizing your audience can help you make reasonable decisions about dress and the choice of materials to include in your presentation.

Think through the experience of speaking to that specific organization. Doing this has motivated me to look up on the Internet, ancillary groups and businesses to provide more background and context for my speech. The more you know about the group, the better your decision-making will be in regard to what you say and when to say it.

## **Get a Program in Advance**

Ask the program chair in advance for a program of the events, which occur around your speech. This allows you to think about ways to connect your speech to something else that is happening in the speaking setting.

For example, knowing a theme or motto for the meeting or conference will help you understand what is important to the group that day and help you incorporate some aspect of the theme. If you see the name of another speaker on the program who stresses some of the same ideas you do, you can call him or her to discuss your approaches to the subject in order not to be repetitive.

## **Proper Pronunciation**

Check pronunciation of proper nouns connected with your speaking situation. Does the group have an acronym connected with some part of their organization? You want to use and pronounce it correctly. Are there any unusual names on the program that you might need to pronounce correctly? Call a person who is in the organization to ask about correct pronunciation.

Many embarrassing moments at the lectern could be avoided if the speaker had used some common sense and asked the local person how to pronounce the name of the person, organization, or town. For example, if you are speaking in Lafayette, Indiana, you'll say, "I'm so glad to be here in LafayETTE today." But if you're speaking in Lafayette, Tennessee, you'll say, "It's great to be in LaFAYette today." Many speakers have nightmare stories about mispronouncing an important name, or, even worse, saying something derogatory about a connection with that very profession.



## Be Alert to Your Audience

You might also ask this question, “Are there things about the group that I should know that would not be obvious to me?” Another question that can increase your common sense quotient is, “What advice can you give me to have a great program?”

Accept the notion that not everyone may be as excited about your topic as you are. Watch the group carefully for signs that you may be pushing your topic too hard. Make sure they understand the importance of your topic without pressuring them to accept your position.

## Honor the Time You’re Given

Our culture is very sensitive to time. We don’t want to be late for an appointment and we don’t want to overstay a visit or interview. Use that same common sense approach in speaking. Arrive early enough that the person in charge is not at the entrance looking for you.

Find out how long you are to speak and then determine to speak a couple of minutes less than the time mentioned. For speakers to continue on past their designated time may destroy any credibility and goodwill that they may have developed.

## Delicate Matters

Take the time to practice your material in front of a friend or colleague. When you finish, ask if there is anything that would be offensive to the audience. Ask that person for advice on how to handle any delicate matter so that you can ensure good judgment about how to cover certain issues or to leave them out altogether. If it is a speech you have delivered several times before, but you are adding new material, practice the new material in front of someone to get feedback on it.

Finally, don’t try to be perfect; this puts too much pressure on you and skews your good judgment under the pressure of the moment. Accept the reality that you will make mistakes and that this is just a part of being human. Common sense is a basic part of successfully relating to your audience, speaking and acting in a way that will not distract from the content of the message you are delivering.

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*Stephen D. Boyd is Professor of Speech Communication in the College of Informatics at Northern Kentucky University in Highland Heights, Kentucky. He works with organizations whose people want to speak and listen more effectively to increase personal and professional success. For article feedback, contact Stephen at [info@sboyd.com](mailto:info@sboyd.com)*

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