

## Aphorisms on Speaking– G492 abridgement

12 March 2005 (16 Jan. 2006)

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### *Abstract*

This article collects aphorisms on speaking excerpted from my article in *Readings in Games and Information*, ed. Eric Rasmusen, Blackwell Publishers, 2001.

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## 9 Speaking

**9.1 Empathy.** Sympathize with your audience. Put yourself in their place.

**9.2 Purpose.** When I was a student at MIT, Peter Temin told us that presentations have three purposes: (1) to tell something to people, (2) to get comments, and (3) to impress the audience. Purpose (3) is perfectly appropriate to a job talk, but it tends to conflict with purposes (1) and (2).

**9.3 Starting.** Write out the introduction word for word. This will help you get over the nervousness of starting to talk.

**9.4 Notes.** Munter (1992, p. 107) suggests the following if you use notes:

1. Use large print.
2. Leave a margin of one-third of the page on the right for last-minute notes.
3. Do not break a paragraph between two pages.
4. Do not staple the notes; it is better to slide pages to one side.
5. For a talk in which exact phrases are important enough that you will actually read your notes verbatim, or if you have to read them because your command of the seminar language is poor, leave the bottom third of the page blank so your head does not go down as you read.
6. An addition I will make to Munter's points is that you should circle quotations or numbers that you will need to read exactly, so they are not lost in the middle of words that you do not need to read.

**9.5 The Outline.** Use the blackboard or a transparency to outline your talk before you start. Do not write this on the board before you start. Instead, write a short outline as you are concluding the introduction. For example, you might write

1. Intro
2. The bargaining problem.
3. Nash solution.

4. Many periods.
5. Incomplete info.

Then check off sections as you finish them.

**9.9 Handouts.** Handouts are useful for tables, figures, equations, notation, technical definitions, abstracts, and statements of propositions. The length should be one to three pages, no more. Unless your audience has the entire paper, you should distribute at least a one-page handout. This is particularly important in a Chicago-style seminar, since you may not get to your main point, and it must be on the handout for the audience to learn it. Handouts are also useful as doodling paper. Don't just use pass out handouts identical to your overheads. Think first. Handouts should have a higher idea to paper ratio.

**9.12 Diagrams.** Label all axes on diagrams you draw on the board.

**9.13 Electrical equipment.** If you are using electrical equipment such an overhead projector, test it before the talk starts. If you are talking as a guest of someone else, be sure and tell them well in advance if you need a room with a screen. Have a backup plan for if the equipment fails entirely. This goes double for computer equipment, unless you bring your own along.

**9.14 Overhead slides.** Use boldface on overheads, especially for numbers. Circle important numbers with a red marker. Use lots of color, for interest, putting boxes around propositions and underlining key terms. In preparing slides, it is fine to use either computer-printed slides (if the font is large enough) or to write them by hand. I most often print out the slides in black ink and then write on them in color with a water-soluble marker. I use a penny to scratch out typos in the printing, and I have an oil-base marker to correct the typos.

**9.16 Visibility.** Test visibility if you have time. Can people at the back of the room read your overheads and the blackboard? Remember to keep overheads high up if the heads of people in front will block the lower part of the screen, as often happens at conferences.

**9.17 Redundancy.** Remember that people blank out frequently when listening. This means the speaker ought to occasionally summarize what

he has done, and structure his talk so that if a listener misses any single thirty-second block he can catch up again later.

- 9.18 Calculations.** Write down all calculations in your notes. At the board it is hard to remember even that  $7(19) = 133$ . If you perform a series of, say, ten arithmetic operations, a mistake is likely, and finding it will take as long as the first try on all ten operations combined.
- 9.19 The length of a seminar.** As an economist, keep budget constraints in mind and don't grumble about not having enough time. Any paper can be presented in any length of time, just as any idea can be written up in any number of pages. This does not mean that you should use up all the available time, though, just as it is counterproductive for a slaveowner to work his slaves for 18 hours a day even though he may be legally entitled to do so. (A reminder: the slave analog is not you, but the listener.)
- 9.20 My audience for these notes.** Much of my advice is directed to speakers with boring topics and poor delivery. That is because most seminars are given by speakers with boring topics and poor delivery. Don't take it personally.
- 9.21 Suspense.** Don't rely on suspense, or delay announcing your main results until the end. After an hour, people usually stop listening anyway, and if your idea is worth spending time on, it is complex enough that people will need to hear the idea at the beginning to understand it by the end. Also, experienced economists often can figure out the middle of your argument by themselves better than a novice can explain it, once they have heard the assumptions and the conclusions. Without the conclusions, though, it's harder to make sense of why particular assumptions were chosen.
- 9.22 The option value of time.** The speaker who only looks at his watch after an hour and then speeds up to cram everything into his time slot is a fool. Look at your watch early, and you will be able to *choose* which parts to rush through. Do not think, "I have an hour left, so I have plenty of time." Many a seminar—especially many a student seminar—is severely behind after the first half hour.

- 9.23 Towards the end.** Towards the end, say things like “My final result is...” to give hope to your fading audience and stimulate them to a final effort to stay awake. And do not disappoint them.
- 9.24 Closing remarks.** If the host asks if you have any closing remarks, that usually means you should have finished five minutes ago. He does not really want closing remarks; he wants you to stop. Your reply should be either (1) “No, I do not have any closing remarks. Thank you,” or (2) Three sentences summarizing the main results; or (3) a closing joke.
- 9.25 The punchline.** The composer of a musical has failed unless the audience leaves humming a tune. The same goes for you. Make them leave with a conclusion that they can’t get out of their heads for the whole rest of the day.
- 9.26 Finish on time.** Martin Luther said, “There are three things, so to speak, which every good preacher should do: First, he takes his place; second, he opens his mouth and says something; third, he knows when to stop.”<sup>1</sup> The first rule of speaking is to finish on time! Perhaps I should rephrase that:

### **FINISH ON TIME!!!**

In your notes, mark certain paragraphs or sections to be dropped if you run out of time. Do not run late unless you sense that your talk is extraordinarily interesting to the people who matter.

Put more pungently: “When you strike ‘ile’, stop boring; many a man has bored clean through and let the ‘ile’ run out through the bottom.”<sup>2</sup>Running late stimulates much more hostility than saying stupid things. Ending early is quite acceptable. People do not really say, “The food here is inedible, and, besides, the portions are so small.”

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Volume 21, The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 7, translated by Jaroslav Pelikan, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (1956).

<sup>2</sup>Josh Billings, As quoted on p. 80 of Francis Wellman, *The Art of Cross Examination*, 4th edition, New York: The Macmillan Company (1936, 1st edition 1903).