Presenting at the Next Annual Meeting: An Actor’s Tips

By Elizabeth Chin (City University of New York)

Learning how to present papers is largely a sink-or-swim endeavor. Delivering a paper well, especially for those who have not done it before, can be a mysterious and frightening prospect. Actors have a range of techniques addressing issues that paper presenters face: overcoming nervousness, dealing with audiences and performing well. The following “tips,” though far from comprehensive, might help to take some of the mystery out of delivering a paper well.

(1) **Talk to your audience.** Remember that audience members don’t want to hate you, they want to like you, they want to be stimulated, entertained and energized. Nothing turns people off more quickly than being read to by someone whose face is buried behind a sheaf of paper. Say hello. Really look at your audience, avoiding the paper-deliverer’s darting glance: the cursory over-the-reading-glasses, vague lifting of the eyes.

(2) **Deliver a paper that is meant to be spoken.** A densely written academic treatise cannot be delivered in 15 minutes. If you try, you will alienate your listeners. Write a 10-page, double-spaced piece that is meant to be said not read. If you want to give people something more “legitimately” academic, have the complete paper available to pass out afterward.

(3) **Performances should be “off book.”** In my memory, the most effective presentations have been those where people do not read but talk in a seemingly extemporaneous manner. A technique actors use to be comfortable with their material is “knowing the subtext.” This involves paraphrasing or rephrasing the text so that if you lose your place or forget the actual words you are supposed to be saying, you can continue without falling apart. Get at your paper’s subtext by explaining it to anybody who will listen, or to yourself.

(4) **Your talent is in your choice.** Never choose an everyday way to do something when you can do that same thing in an extraordinary way. Wow the audience, do not skulk past them. Relax, enjoy yourself. Smile. Your discomfort makes the audience uncomfortable; they will concentrate more on the exhibition of your nervousness than on what you are saying.

Leave your pockets and your hair alone.

(5) **Breathe properly, project, speak clearly.** Proper breathing is essential because it calms you mentally and maintains relaxation of your vocal apparatus. Breathe in and your stomach should go out; breathe out and your stomach should go in. Most people breathe in and expand their chests, not their stomachs. This creates tension in the throat which is bad if you are speaking. In projecting your voice, avoid depending on microphones which depersonalize a speaker and makes you slouch. Speaking clearly and at a reasonable speed is not that easy, and after 10 minutes many of us are beginning to get hoarse. Take a moment, drink water, breathe and continue.

(6) **Performance requires rehearsal.** Practice in front of a mirror, or deliver the paper to a teddy bear. Make your friends sit down and listen. Do whatever works for you and expect to feel a little silly, if not downright stupid. This is nothing compared to how you will feel if you march up to the podium without having practiced at all.

(7) **Performance is a two-way street.** Presenters should command audience attention, but should not have to demand it. Katharine Hepburn once stopped in the middle of a Broadway performance to acerbically chastise a noisy audience member. While slipping in and out of conference rooms at odd times is unavoidable, remember that it is disruptive. Talking during a paper is avoidable. I would rather have somebody sleeping through a paper rather than talking through it. Finally, sitting up straight and breathing properly really helps to reduce fatigue, especially in the over- and underheated airless rooms where we so often find ourselves at academic conferences.

Audiences like to be entertained, and there is no rule that says a presentation cannot be entertaining and intellectually stimulating at the same time. Enjoy giving your paper, enjoy your audience, and they are likely to enjoy the experience, whether or not they agree with your ideas. Afterward, you can meet your audience on equal-footh, in any convenient spot, where you can mutter and ramble to your heart’s content.

[Chin, who is ABD in anthropology at CUNY, also has a BFA in acting and has studied with Stella Adler—Ed]