

## CHAPTER 4

### Audience Focus and Connection

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#### ANXIETY REDUCTION VIA AUDIENCE CONNECTION

##### **Know Your Audience**

While your speaking anxiety resides within you, it is often made worse by the interaction—or lack of interaction—you have with your audience. To begin, an anxious speaker often makes his or her audience uncomfortable. Jokingly, this is called “second hand anxiety.” It is not easy to watch someone struggle while presenting. Since most audiences are comprised of kind, empathetic people who want the speaker to succeed, they enact behaviors that they think will help a nervous speaker gain composure and calm down, such as avert their gaze, distract themselves by looking at their phones, or chat with each other. Unfortunately, a nervous speaker witnessing these benevolent audience

behaviors views the audience as disengaged and uninvolved, which only makes the speaker more nervous. The best way to avoid this awkward, anxiety-induced audience disconnection is to realize that your primary job as a speaker is to make your audience comfortable. If they are comfortable, they can pay attention and connect to you and your content.

In order to make your audience comfortable, you must break an insidious assumption that most speakers make. Many speakers assume that giving a presentation is about them as speakers. When you prepare a presentation from your perspective, you likely pass over critical bits of information and fail to pull your audience into the content. Others label this self-focused approach “the curse of knowledge.” Simply put, you often know too much about what you present. A better, more thorough approach to your presentation is to begin by focusing on the audience. Competent speakers never ask themselves, “What do I want to say?” Instead, they ask, “What does my audience need to hear or learn?” These two questions might sound similar, but they are very different. By focusing on your audience’s needs, you remove yourself from the spotlight. Your audience’s needs are paramount. In taking this **audience-focused perspective**, nervous speakers can breathe a sigh of relief because failure is not related solely to them. If failure does occur, it results from the interaction between the audience and the topic. In addition, by embracing an audience-focused approach, you not only engage your audience more—since you’re giving them what they need—but you will present content that scaffolds their

knowledge so that they can truly appreciate and understand your message. Taken all together, this approach allows your audience to be more comfortable and, thus, receive your message more readily.

I worked with a fantastic third-grade teacher who was incredibly confident and engaging when she was presenting to her students, but when asked to speak in front of adults, she became paralyzed by her fear. I asked her what made her a successful teacher. She quickly responded that she understands the needs of her students and makes sure to present her concepts in a way that meets those needs. We then spent some time extrapolating this simple recipe for her teaching success to her adult audiences. Her epiphany came when she realized that she needed to focus on the needs of her grown-up audiences, just as she does with her 8-year olds. By refocusing, she was able to contain her anxiety and release her passion. In fact, rather than being anxious about presenting to adults, she is now excited to present to them—she enjoys it now.

The audience-centric approach does require some extra work. You have to truly know your audience. Ask yourself the following three questions to help you better determine your audience's needs:

- ▶ What knowledge and/or past experience(s) have my audience had with my topic?
- ▶ What attitudes and emotions will my audience likely have toward my topic?
- ▶ What areas of resistance or hesitation will my audience likely have toward my topic?

The answers to these three questions help you to develop and deliver a presentation that fulfills the needs of your audience, reduces your anxiety, and makes your message more compelling.



**Try this:** Think about your presentation topic. Ask yourself, “What does my audience need to know about the topic?” and “How can I ensure that they get the information they need?” The answers to these two questions move the spotlight away from you and put it on your audience.

## Audience Connecting Techniques

Beyond being audience-centric and making your audience comfortable, your next goal when presenting is to pull your audience forward in their seats. You want them engaged and with you. Clearly, addressing their needs will help make your content compelling, but this is not sufficient. If you truly want your content to move your audience and avoid slouching disengagement, then you must make use of what I term Audience-Connecting Techniques (ACTs). ACTs bring your audience into your presentation. **ACTs invite their participation and serve notice that you expect engagement.** While many ACTs exist, the following techniques are among the most effective:

One easy way to use ACTs is to **ask your audience to participate**. For example, “With a show of hands, how many of you have...” or asking “which side of my slide best represents your experience?” Requests such as these show your audience that they are involved in your presentation.

Another useful ACT is to **ask your audience to visualize a situation or outcome**. For example, you can ask your audience to “imagine what it would be like if...” or “remember back to a time when...” Since your audience is seeing something in their mind’s eye, rather than just listening to you describe it, they become more engaged and your point becomes more vivid and lasting for them.

**Rephrasing information as questions is another great ACT.** Many presenters relay lots of information to their audiences in a declarative way, and while some of this information will no doubt invoke interest, you can get your audience even more curious by reframing facts as questions. Instead of claiming “my plan will help our company expand in Europe,” ask “how can we best expand in Europe?” Avoid just stating data (e.g., “we saved \$1M.”), and reframe data as a question (e.g., “How did we save \$1M?”).

Possibly, the most important ACT is to **focus on the relevance of your topic for your audience**. Helping your audience to see the value of your topic to them is critical to engaging them. Be sure to spend time detailing the specific links between your topic and your audience’s lives. You can signal this relevance with key phrases such as “the bottom line for you is...” or “what’s important to remember is...” Relevancy is the best antidote for apathy, and it brings with it a high level of participation.



**Try this:** To help you remember to drive home the relevance of your points, focus on the key take away(s) for your audience. At the end of each major point you make, think to yourself

how you would end the sentence: “The bottom line for you is...”. While you might not actually speak these lines at the end of each of your points, you will be sure to focus on each point’s relevance to your audience, which in turn, will make you more confident because you will know that they are getting what they need from your presentation.

Another helpful ACT is **Think-Pair-Share**. Ask your audience to take a moment to think of an answer to a question you pose or to come up with a potential alternative. Next, encourage them to discuss their response with someone near them. After this brief discussion, solicit their input. Think-Pair-Share is a powerful participation tool because it not only bolsters the audience’s confidence in responding because they have collaborated on their response, but better ideas typically arise as a result of multiple brains working together.

A useful tool for getting your audience connected and curious is to **interrupt your story**—build suspense and curiosity by taking a break before you end your story. A student of mine did a masterful job of this when he was presenting the most useful advice he had ever received. He began by telling us of a harrowing event from his childhood, and right before the part where he was to let us know how it turned out, he said “before I tell you how things ended, let me first share with you...”. This pause had all of us fully engaged in what he was saying.

**Analogies** serve as great ACTs. By comparing new information to something your audience is already familiar with, analogies activate the audience’s existing mental constructs, which allows for quicker information

processing and understanding. For example, when I teach the purpose and value of organizing a presentation, I often say that a presenter's job is to be a tour guide. This analogy allows my students to leverage all of their experiences of being on tours to understand not only the importance of organizing a presentation, but other ideas as well, such as setting expectations, checking in with audience members, transitioning between ideas, etc.

A final ACT is to **create a common experience that you and your audience share**. A great technique is to start with a video clip. When the video ends, you and your audience can discuss it. By facilitating the conversation and providing commentary, you get your audience engaged.



**Try this:** Identify two **Audience-Connecting Techniques** from those mentioned above that you feel most comfortable using. Think of a number of ways to invoke the ACTs you selected in your next presentation.

## Commencing

Nowhere are the audience-centric approach and ACTs more salient and useful than in the **introduction to your presentation**. Commencing a presentation can be very challenging. Going from silence to brilliance is hard! Effective introductions are critical to your success. They serve as the vehicle through which your audience gets introduced to your topic, to you, and to your expectations for them. Yet, so many presenters rely on

the banal “Hi my name is...and today I’m going to talk about...” start. A good introduction does several things:

- ▶ Fosters focus
- ▶ Reveals relevance
- ▶ Clarifies your credibility
- ▶ Explains what can be expected

First, your introduction needs to get your audience’s attention. Your audience does not typically come to your presentation ready to focus and pay attention to what you’re saying; rather, they likely arrive from meetings, other presentations, and personal interactions, so they need to get focused. This means that your first order of business is to get your audience’s attention. The most effective way to fulfill your introduction’s first purpose is to use an ACT, such as asking a polling question (e.g., “How many of you have ever been frustrated by...?”). Any ACT helps your audience to focus on you and your message. They pull your audience into your presentation. Here are other tried and true ways to grab your audience’s attention:

- ▶ State an interesting fact or statistic
- ▶ Begin with a quote from someone the audience knows or respects
- ▶ Tell a joke (humor can be risky since not everyone finds the same thing funny)
- ▶ Provide an anecdote or story relevant to your topic



Once you have your audience's attention, you need to get their interest. Interest is where you tell your audience why your topic is relevant, what's in it for them, and why they should listen. In other words, you're answering the questions "So what? "Why should I care as an audience member?" For business presentations, the best way to communicate relevance is to explain how your presentation's topic increases or decreases something of value to the audience. For example, your presentation might improve sales, increase market share, or increase employee retention. Conversely, your talk might shorten development time, save money, or reduce redundant effort.

The next step in an effective introduction is to establish your credibility. You need to explain why you're the right person to be covering your information. Audiences need to know that you have some relationship to the content on which you are speaking that warrants their investment of time and attention. Sometimes, revealing your credibility is not required: Everybody might already know you; maybe somebody has introduced you; or perhaps there is a published biography of who you are.

Finally and most importantly, you need to set expectations for what you intend to do for the audience, where you will take them, and what information are you going to review. This can be done in many ways. For example, you can use an agenda slide—I prefer graphical ones over simple bullet points. Moreover, you can list questions you intend to answer. People like to know what they are in for. In addition to setting content

expectations, you're also establishing the tone that you want your audience to feel. You reveal your tone in the words you choose (e.g., "I am really excited...") and the energy you bring to your delivery.

I often tell my clients and students that they should start their introductions like a James Bond movie where action begins immediately as the lights go down. In this way, the audience focuses and becomes curious immediately. Once the audience is hooked, then the famous white circles cross the screen and the title credits begin. Your presentations should start in a similarly engaging and relevant way (with hopefully fewer stunts and less violence) and then go into introducing yourself and setting expectations.

Since most speakers experience some degree of anxiety when presenting, they often hide behind a lectern or place their hands up in front of their bodies leaning back away from the audience. As discussed in Chapter 3, this nonverbal retreating position signals fear and invites disengagement. Rather, as you begin, stand tall in front of the audience—no podium in sight—and **step forward with your arms extended away from your body**. A start like this nonverbally communicates confidence and demonstrates that you want your audience involved.

When you focus on your audience and use audience connecting techniques throughout your presentation—but especially in your introduction, you reap many benefits: (a) Your audience feels more connected to your content, (b) your audience will be more comfortable and ready to listen, and (c) you will feel less anxious because you and your audience are actively working together.

# Key Take Aways

- Your job as a presenter is to be in service of your audience. Focus on their needs.
- Avoid the “curse of knowledge” by constantly taking your audience’s perspective on your content and claims.
- Connected presentations draw your audience in. Use Audience Connecting Techniques throughout your presentation to help your audience be engaged.
- Create an introduction that first garners attention and then immediately explains the relevance of your material to your audience.
- By connecting to your audience, you can reduce your speaking anxiety because you are working together.

# Activity

For an upcoming presentation, analyze your audience and their needs by answering the following questions:

- What are my audience's expectations of my presentation?
- Has my audience heard a presentation similar to mine before? What worked and didn't with this prior presentation?
- What does my audience know about my topic and position?
- What are my audience's attitudes toward my topic and position?
- What areas of concern or resistance might my audience have?
- What questions might my audience have about my topic?

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