

# Chapter 1

## A Professional Job

Speaking technically is a key part of the work of any professional person. Indeed,

**A professional person can be defined as someone who communicates to people less well-informed than the professional the opportunities for choice in technical matters.**

To do this, most professional people spend considerable amounts of time speaking technically — giving conference presentations, showing visitors around sites or laboratories, giving lectures to the lay public, making presentations to funding bodies, addressing juries or public inquiries, and so forth.

The art of speaking technically has nothing to do with acting, declamation, oratory, or the hype of salesmanship (which may have the object of subverting choice rather than encouraging it). Speaking technically is, however, one form of propaganda — the propagating of messages to influence action, for choices lead to

action. A basic axiom of this booklet is that

**The object of speaking technically is always to change people's behaviour.**

Even when the only change in behaviour you intend is that your listeners should say 'Aha!' it is likely that you nevertheless want them to read a book or paper to follow up and build upon their initial excitement and interest. Therefore,

**Always plan a talk with a view to what your listeners could do as a result of hearing it.**

You may have picked up this booklet because speaking technically makes you anxious. If you take the business seriously, you always will feel anxious — but anxious to do the best for your listeners, rather than anxious lest you make a fool of yourself. With proper preparation, you will not make a fool of yourself; and you are more likely to speak effectively if you follow the one key rule:

**Think what your listeners need to know, not what you want to say.**

The thesis of the booklet is that in technical communication content matters most.

Get that right by thinking about the interests and needs of your listeners and your purpose in speaking technically, and you will feel less nervous. Any symptoms of nervousness that remain will not matter because your listeners will be too interested in what you are saying to notice.

It is, however, precisely because as a professional person you are sensitive to the needs of others, and perhaps because you may have suffered from people who were not, that you may find the whole prospect daunting. This is because

**The most common fear in speaking technically is that of losing the audience's attention by boring those who know something about your subject or bewildering those who know little.**

The most difficult type of audience to address is that of mixed technical background. Indeed, because most audiences are of mixed background, Chapters 2 and 3 below deal with strategies for handling these matters.

If you are reasonably confident that you have planned the talk appropriately, your level of anxiety will be correspondingly reduced.

None of this is to imply that the presentation skills of voice production, stance, and so forth do not matter; they do (see Chapter 5 below). There can be little doubt that the authority of ideas is linked to the authority of the person who utters them. The key point in speaking technically, however, is that

**You will feel authoritative if you know what you are trying to do and why; you will sound authoritative if you have thought about the process of communication as thoroughly as you have thought about the content.**

Most people have no difficulty explaining themselves in conversation, and can often make themselves both interesting and intelligible to fellow specialists and to non-specialists simultaneously. What is missing in formal presentations is immediate feed-back. You can get this by building question-answering time into your presentation (see Chapter 9 below); but you can substitute for the lack of direct feedback by very careful planning of your presentations.

There remains the anxiety of dealing with the unfamiliar.

**Reduce your anxiety: Think what is the worst possible thing that could happen during your presentation and plan to prevent it.**

In short, try to turn a vague apprehension into a list of concrete and specific hazards, and then note down what action you would need to take. Here are some common ones:

*Fear* : "I will forget what I was going to say."

*Action* : Have notes in an accessible format (see Chapters 5 and 6 below).

*Fear* : "There will be someone there who knows more about the subject than I do."

*Action* : Be clear about the purpose of your presentation, and draw on others to help achieve it (see the section on Questions in Chapter 9 below).

*Fear* : "I will be in a strange place, and things could go wrong."

*Action* : Check details as far ahead as possible, and have a "count-down" checklist for the day (see Appendix A).

With complex audio-visual equipment, use “belt and braces” by having back-up systems/materials (see Chapter 6 below).

Most of these points, like most of this booklet, will seem self-evident when spelt out. But when you are rightly and properly absorbed in the technical details of your specialism, you may overlook certain basic matters which could transform your presentation of ideas.