

Title: How to talk to a public meeting

Reference: CAM006



Introduction

This Factsheet will be particularly useful if you have:

- to make a short presentation to a council committee
- to speak at a public meeting, for example in support of some new walker-friendly initiative
- to give a report of, for example, your work as a Ramblers officer at an AGM

It is not aimed at witnesses or advocates at public inquiries, etc, nor does it deal with slide- or PowerPoint- presentations; it is about short talks.

In the course of your work as a Ramblers volunteer you may find it useful to speak at a council committee-meeting, perhaps in support of a new pedestrian link or crossing or other road-safety measure; or at a public meeting held to canvass local opinion about a proposal to close an alleyway; or you may be asked at an AGM to give a report of your Ramblers work during the previous year. This note aims to provide a few tips to those unused to speaking in public.

Some people are confident at speaking without any note; some prefer to use headings or cue-cards as an *aide-mémoire*; others prefer to read out a prepared text *verbatim* and, though some think this lacks spontaneity, it can in fact be done in such a way as to look reasonably 'natural'.

Preparation

Whichever way you find suits you best, plan the speech (or address to committee, or report) under a number of points, so that it has a definite structure. Even if you are one of the ones who are confident at speaking without notes, you will find this a useful exercise. Write it out (obviously, on a word-processor if you have one to hand) a couple of days in advance, if that is possible, and reflect on it overnight, and finalise it the next day. Check you have not gone for too much content for the situation or slot in which you will be speaking. Remember that you are writing *for speaking*, not for somebody to read, so it needs to sound good, not to read well – so use colloquial expression instead of the formal style you would use if writing for print. Remember as well that if you talk in abbreviations and acronyms you may lose many of your audience, so say each one in full once or twice before reverting to abbreviation. Try to make sure that the final sentence encapsulates both the main message and your thanks to the audience for having listened. Try and inject a measure of humour unless the circumstances suggest otherwise.

Read the final version over aloud a couple of times. *Go slowly*. Time it, especially if you are time-limited 'on the day' (as you almost certainly will be at a council committee-meeting), shortening it if necessary. (You can get a rough idea of the length in minutes by dividing the number of words by 120.)

Speaking from headings/cards

If you are confident at speaking from cues or headings, then summarise the main headings, writing them down, preferably on small cards. Include on them any precise facts, statistics, key phrases and anything else which needs to be stated exactly, including the names of organisations, initiatives, etc, that you are normally used to abbreviating.

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Rehearse it again, using the cards instead of the full text, but without trying to memorise the text word-for-word.

Speaking from a script

If you are not confident at speaking from cue-cards, consider using a full script.¹ Properly done, this can appear more ‘natural’ and spontaneous than you might think. Having planned the speech and read it over as suggested at paragraphs 3 and 4 above, go over it again and alter all the formal-sounding phrases that look fine on the printed page but sound artificial and stilted in speech. For example, being used to writing for print, you may have written “there are many factors which merit the provision of a pedestrian crossing at this point.” Aloud, that would sound better as “there’re loads of reasons for having a crossing by those shops.” You are probably used to writing something like, “it would be unwise to cross here, but there is no alternative”; but aloud, said with some force, “you’d be *daft* to cross here, but you have to”, is more accessible to the audience. So remember all the way through to use everyday speech expressions, replacing most of the instances of “it is” with “it’s”, “you have” with “you’ve”, and so on.

If you are using a word-processor you may find three things useful. First, and most obviously, use a clear font like Arial at a size easy to read even if you are standing and the script is on a desk or lectern in front of you – so perhaps 14pt, or 16 pt. Secondly, give the left side of the page a good margin, 2 or 3 inches/4 or 5 centimetres instead of the usual 1 in./2.5cm – so that ‘on the day’ you can write in extra notes in reply to what might have already been said by others. Thirdly, it can be helpful to hard-return each line at a place where a pause seems most natural, so breaking up the text into shorter phrases, line by line, so that instead of it appearing on the page as—

‘Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for this opportunity to speak about the proposed crossing. I’m here from the Ramblers, an organisation that campaigns about rights of way, but above all we promote walking everywhere, not just for weekend recreation but as sustainable and healthy transport too, for everyday journeys for all—to work, the shops, the post-office, the doctor’s, the pub ...’

You may find it easier to reel off if it appears on the page like this—

‘Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,
thank you for this opportunity to speak about the proposed crossing.
I’m here from the Ramblers,
an organisation that campaigns about rights of way,
but above all we promote walking everywhere,
not just for weekend recreation
but as sustainable and healthy transport too,
for everyday journeys for all—
to work, the shops, the post-office, the doctor’s, the pub.’

¹ One of the greatest advocates known to the British courts, Norman Birkett KC – a former vice-president of the Ramblers – wrote out *verbatim* his first ever opening speech to a court including the words ‘May it please the Bench, I appear for the plaintiff ...’.

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So consider that when you write down what you are going to say.

If you are to be speaking from a lectern or desk, do not staple your sheets together. Print on one side of them only; and, when reading them out, move each sheet to the side unobtrusively when you have finished with it. If you are to be speaking without a lectern or desk, you may find it easier to file them in a ring-binder folder and hold that open (if doing this, print the sheets on both sides so you have fewer pages to turn). At a final rehearsal, practise looking up often and in different directions as you read it.

Clarity of voice

Practise with the voice by reading anything out. You are aiming to speak slowly (a common error among speakers is to speak too fast.)

and loudly without shouting. So you are seeking to *project* the voice, which is not the same as to shout. When practising, begin speaking softly and on a low note; gradually increase the volume and intensity of tone as you speak. There will come a point which seems both loud and not forced. That, in all but the largest halls (where greater volume still may be needed, except where there are microphones), is what is to aim for. Make sure that you do not drop your voice at the end of each phrase or sentence.

Speaking 'on the day'

If you are nervous about speaking you may find it a psychological advantage to get there early. If you will be speaking from your seat in the audience, get a seat that suits you well; if near the front, sit by an aisle so when speaking you can move into it and half-turn round to direct some of the speech at those behind. If your talk is to be from the front, go to where you will be speaking from and have a good look down the hall from there. If there is hardly anybody there yet, try a few phrases aloud (over the microphone, if possible, if you are to be using one) to get an idea of the acoustic.

Before your turn to speak, remind yourself of the need to speak *slowly*.

If speaking from the front of the hall (or if addressing a committee) pause briefly before starting and look at the audience, catching the eye of a few of them if possible. Once you have started, remember to keep going slowly and deliberately and with force. Avoid any mannerism likely to irritate the listeners: try not to sway or rock on your heels; gesticulate hardly at all, or not at all. Do not fiddle with anything. As you speak, look at the audience – different sections of it, in turn. Where appropriate, vary the delivery, perhaps rattling off three or four bullet-points *staccato* to hammer home a point, but do not go so fast that the listeners cannot follow. Make a deliberate pause sometimes.

If anybody interrupts by asking a question it is usually better to say that you will take questions at the end ("if there is time", or "if that is allowed"). You cannot always do that: for example if it is a council committee you are addressing you will either have to answer briefly or say you will find out the answer and get it to them later. If you do take questions, repeat them first, so that everybody knows what question you are answering.

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Slow down towards the end. Try to get one final 'look-in-the-eye' at them as you say your final sentence containing the summary of your point and your thanks to them for listening. If by any chance the talk moved them enough to applaud, pause briefly to acknowledge it before you sit down.

