

## Clear speaking

When people speak, many worry about being clearly understood. This is especially important in academic study to express ideas, research or arguments. You can make it easier with four principles.

### 1. Know your listener

Communication is never only about the speaker – it's about the speaker's connection *to the listener*. That means good communication only happens when you know who your speaker is.

- What do they want – what will they get from listening to you?
- What do they already know (and not)?
- What are they interested in (and not)?
- What knowledge and interests do you both have?

Your main challenge is to show how your idea is important to *their* experiences and wishes. This can depend on whether they're academic or not, local or international, and young or old. If you know them, it's easy. If you don't, find out about them – chat for a bit before broaching difficult ideas. If it's to a group, make a reasonable guess (e.g. at a conference, you can assume a lot about listeners' interests, knowledge and wishes). Always start by thinking about who it's to.

### 2. Keep it short

Before you start, think about what's important. A few good points works better than a flood of words, so set 2-4 basic priorities. Then make those points one at a time in a logical order. Make sure each point is clear before continuing – in a conversation, you'll probably be interrupted after each step anyway – and don't give too much detail. If your listener's interested, they'll ask.



### 3. Take questions

Being asked questions is good; it means you've got your listener's interest. Don't make it a speech (except in very formal situations, e.g. presentation) – make it an exchange, with you and your listener building the meaning together. Good speaking includes responding to questions. Similarly, ask questions yourself – they confirm/improve your sense of other people's meaning.

Most academic speaking works like conversation. Even if it's about academic things (competing theories, background reading, methods, findings), it usually stays relaxed and friendly. Taking turns, swapping responses, and open-mindedly exploring ideas are all normal. In all situations – including formal situations – notice your listeners' reaction, and adapt to it. Think about how you'll respond to people's interest, irritation, confusion, boredom, etc. – find the *causes* of problems (e.g. why is my listener bored; how can I change that?) and *use* good responses (e.g. they're interested – how can I use that?). Each speaker will handle those situations differently.

### 4. Use tactics to make your meaning clear

- (a) **Keep it simple.** Always adapt to your listener's understanding/attention span. Use ordinary, familiar language and be careful with jargon (discipline-specific words). Certainly avoid explaining jargon by using other jargon. In speaking, sentences are less important, so keep each statement short and direct.
- (b) **Keep it relevant.** Find a practical application/example. Try to make it something your listener knows and cares about from their own experience.
- (c) **Make a comparison.** Especially to explain abstract ideas, find more common images that work the same way. For example, Einstein explained some of his most difficult theories with an image of trains passing each other. We've all travelled on trains, so the parallels make the difficult content easier. You can use the same tactic.