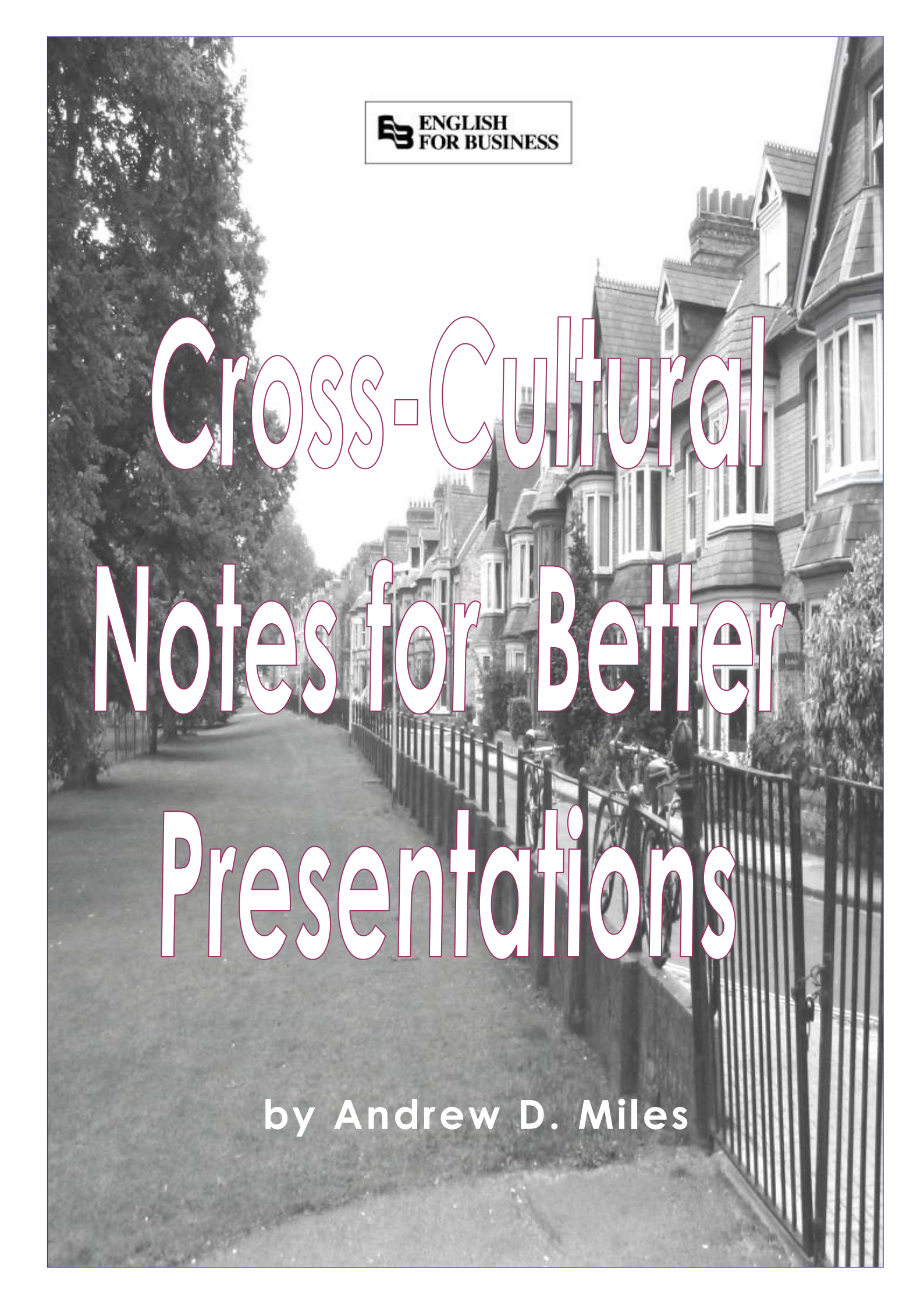


The logo for 'English for Business' features a stylized 'EB' monogram on the left, followed by the words 'ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS' in a bold, sans-serif font.

**ENGLISH  
FOR BUSINESS**

The background of the cover is a black and white photograph of a long, narrow residential street. On the right side, there is a row of multi-story houses with prominent bay windows and gabled roofs. A black metal fence runs along the sidewalk in front of these houses. On the left side, there are large, leafy trees. The overall scene is a quiet, urban neighborhood.

# Cross-Cultural Notes for Better Presentations

**by Andrew D. Miles**

# Cross-Cultural Notes for Better Business English Presentations



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Cover photograph by Andrew D. Miles

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## 1. SET YOUR OBJECTIVE

Before planning your speech, please answer these questions:

- What do I want to get from this speech? What's my objective?
- What are the public expecting from me? What is their objective?
- How can I make the aims of the public match my own?



## 2. GET TO KNOW THE PUBLIC

You are speaking because people have decided it's worth their while to listen to you. Therefore, find out:

- How many people there will be: You need to prepare handouts, plan movement and foresee questions.
- Who these people are: Managers or clerks? What's their level of expertise? This will help you decide what to include or leave out.
- Also, you must to know which type of speech they're expecting. Will this be an information session? A sales pitch? An admonishment? The style of your words will depend on the kind of address.



## 3. DESIGN YOUR VISUAL AIDS

Visual aids are important, especially for foreign speakers, as they help to clarify and strengthen your message. However, keep them as simple as possible and remember that pictures and charts are only relevant if they reinforce a proposal, make information comprehensible or provide examples.



## 4. VISIT THE VENUE

If possible, have a look at the place beforehand. Check the following:

- Do all the electronic devices work?
- Can everyone see the speaker?
- Can everyone hear?
- Are there markers for the flipchart?
- Is there an eraser for the whiteboard?
- Is there enough room on the stage for me to walk?
- Can I move amidst the public?
- Do they have a lectern or a desk?
- Where can I place my visual aids?



## 5. DRESS FOR THE OCCASION

Try to follow international standards and don't forget good, comfortable shoes. You might have to remain standing for some time and shoes are right in front of the public.

Do not wear too much jewellery, as light could glitter on your necklace or earring and deviate attention from your lips to your gems. People should remember your ideas, not the size of your pendant.

And don't touch your clothes while you speak! It invites listeners to move their gaze from your lips to your hands.

### Andrew's note:

Remember that good perfume comes in expensive bottles, so always wear quality accessories and garments.



## 6. WATCH YOUR IMAGE

Your words are more important than your aspect. However, if listeners don't like what they see in your appearance, hear in your voice or feel in your movement, they may not care what you say. Their minds might have already been made up before you express your ideas.

- The right image conveys trust. The wrong image conveys doubt.
- You never get a second chance to make a first impression.
- The way you look, smell, sound and move can determine the success of a first meeting. Importance wanes after that, but never disappears.



## 7. VISUAL FACTORS

There are several visual judgment factors that affect the way listeners form an opinion on you:

- Ethnic origin, including skin colour is one of the first characteristics people notice. In most countries, higher credibility is given to majority racial groups.
- Gender is another clearly visible element. In some cultures, males still project more authority than females for both male and female listeners.
- Age is also important, whereas being older carries more authority than being younger. On another line, most people will listen more readily to speakers around their own age group.



## 8. AURAL FACTORS

Aspects related to hearing can make a presentation succeed or fail. They are:

- **Loudness:** Make sure everybody hears you, but avoid shouting because it will irritate listeners.
- **Speed:** Check your talking speed to make sure it's got the right balance. If it's too fast it will become unintelligible; if it's too slow it will turn dull.
- **Accent:** Make sure you pronounce words correctly, but do not try to hide your accent; you're a foreigner so nobody expects you to speak like a native.

### Andrew's note:

Remember that it's OK to be different as long as your speech is comprehensible. You're there to transmit ideas, not to pass an English exam, so vocalise clearly and look at the public to make sure they are following your sounds.



## 9. KINETIC FACTORS

Movement can also affect your presentation. It is a good idea to move around the hall to:

- Emphasise, as eyes will follow your body when you walk.
- Change subject. If possible, stroll to another place in the room or adopt a different posture when you change subjects so listeners associate this new place or posture with another theme.
- Gain thinking time. You don't need to speak while you move, so this will give you a few seconds to plan an answer or recall a word.
- Release tension after a lengthy explanation. Motion will encourage your audience to change their sitting position and release contained energy that will help them relax.



## 10. TOUCH & SPACE FACTORS

Personal space varies from culture to culture, but touching someone during a formal presentation is rarely a good idea.

However, getting close to the public – as long as you don't invade their private space – generates rapport and a feeling of confidence that you can exploit for a few seconds to utter statements you want the public to pay special attention to.

Remember that if you wander amongst the audience you must try to reach as many people as possible, because spectators who do not get the chance to be near you will feel dejected.



## 11. OLFACTORY FACTORS

Smell is not particularly relevant in public addresses, as most listeners are too far to perceive your body odour.

However, remember you might be standing for a long time in often hot rooms so do not rule out resorting to artificial fragrances.



## 12. WHEN WILL I SPEAK?

The moment when you issue your speech will also influence its success.

- Try not to speak before meals as listeners will probably feel hungry and will be thinking about their food.
- Also, avoid the slot following a large lunch, as some attendees will be sleepy.

### Andrew's note:

A good moment is right after coffee breaks, when listeners have not only had a rest but also a stimulating drink and are ready to open their minds to new ideas.



### 13. HOW LONG WILL I SPEAK

Plan your speech for the time allowed and carry some extra material to use if everything goes too fast and you have minutes to spare.

Also, prepare a shorter version in case you have to start late.

Calculating the length of a presentation can be tricky, so role play it beforehand. Don't forget to take into account the minutes you'll invest handing out material, showing visual aids or answering questions.



### 14. WHO WILL I SPEAK WITH?

If you are not the only speaker, it is better to:

- Try to avoid talking after experienced lecturers, because your presentation could be dull compared to theirs.
- Try to contact the speakers who come before and after you to make sure your subjects do not overlap.
- Listen to the lecturers before you and be prepared to alter your words if they refer to the subjects you're planning to cover.



### 15. PUNCTUAL & COURTEOUS

People have given up on other activities to hear you speak and you must respect them by starting punctually. Also, most will have other commitments after your speech so do finish on time.

- Be considerate to everyone – even to disagreeable individuals or those who ask obnoxious questions.
- People feel uncomfortable when you don't follow international courtesy rules.
- Politeness means doing nothing that might offend anyone, including minorities.



## 16. PARTS OF YOUR SPEECH

Whatever structure you plan for your speech, it needs:

- A short introduction where you define what you'll talk about.
- A body where you develop and explain your ideas.
- An ending where you round off your message and invite the public to ask questions.



## 17. DIVIDE AND CONQUER

Break up the body of your speech into simple parts that listeners can remember easily.

Most people can keep between 3 and 5 concepts in their present memory, so split your speech into no more than 5 chapters or lines of thought.



## 18. START YOUR SPEECH

Begin by greeting the public, smiling and saying something nice (*i.e. It's wonderful to be here talking to you again*).

Establish a common goal, if possible by using the first person plural (*i.e.: Today we'll find a solution to the sales problem*).



## 19. INTRODUCE THE SUBJECT

Summarise what you're planning to say.

A synopsis defines the subject of your speech, provides listeners with a plan of your proposals and limits the scope of your presentation.

It also allows the people who are not interested to leave the room.



## 20. LOOK AT YOUR PUBLIC

Look at the audience and not over them, so men and women think you're addressing each one in particular. This will also give you feedback on how they're responding to your words. Observing is your best source of information.

Glance at everyone and not only at those who seem to agree. Do not avoid anyone's eyes, even if they seem hostile.

Do not watch any one person for more than a few seconds – because then you'll be turning a public event into a private affair. The person will feel uncomfortable and the rest of the audience will feel neglected.



## 21. WATCH YOUR INTONATION

Practise intonation before your speech, as natives grant importance to words based on stress. Remember that every language's cadence is different, so tone variations from your mother tongue might not be valid for English. Sometimes listeners will not get the gist of your sentences if you apply the wrong intonation patterns.



## 22. MEMORISE KEY TERMS

Memorise key words and expressions – because you will not have time to look for them when facing the public!

Make sure you know the exact definition and spelling of important terms – since you might have to write them.



## 23. AVOID TRICKY WORDS

Especially if your level of English is limited, you should avoid using words and phrases that are hard to pronounce (*i.e.*: *paleoanthropologic*, *Keynesian*), have lost their value (*great*, *terrific*) or are repetitive (*true reason*, *literally crazy*).



## 24 GET THE SOUNDS RIGHT

Practise the pronunciation of key words.

If you have a doubt with a name, ask how to pronounce it correctly.

Don't hide your accent by speaking with your mouth closed or increasing your speed, because people will find it harder to follow you.

### Andrew's note:

Talk slowly, look at listeners and don't try to compete with outside interferences. If there's a noise, wait until it subsides.



## 25 USE POSITIVE WORDS

It's better to say "*sales are higher this year*" than "*sales are not as bad as last year*". Positive words make the public feel safer and listen more openly.



## 26 GET KISSED!

### Andrew's note:

Transmit a concept more effectively by explaining it, then giving an example, showing a graph and if possible also by including it in a story, joke or anecdote.

KISS stands for: keep it short and simple.

Use one idea to a sentence and build the sentence around the idea, since many listeners are used to short statements and find it hard to handle several notions in one phrase. Therefore, cut long sentences into smaller units and link them with connectors.

Try to avoid more than one adjective per noun or more than one adverb per verb.

It is easier to explain complex notions by presenting ideas in several formats so people who do not follow your point in one way have the chance to understand it in another.



## 27. WRITE KEY WORDS

If possible, get a whiteboard to write down words as you speak.

- Writing helps people who can't follow your accent get a grasp of what's happening.
- Writing gives listeners a few seconds of silence to relax.
- Writing creates anticipation because everyone will want to know what you've jotted down.
- If you leave your words visible, listeners can later use the whiteboard as a map to your chain of thoughts.



## 28. MAGNIFY GESTURES

Magnify facial gestures, since they will help to get your message across in case verbal language fails and people find it hard to understand your accent.

Remember that body language transmits a lot of information so don't be afraid of gesticulating.

Listeners will take non-verbal signs as part of your personality and will not pay conscious attention to your gestures.

### Andrew's note:

Do check whether your non-verbal signs are suitable for the culture of the country you are visiting.



## 29. GIVE TOPIC CHANGE CLUES

Mark subject changes clearly so listeners become aware that you're no longer talking about the same issue. People must always know exactly what the topic is so they don't get lost. Most men and women don't listen all the time – so when they tune back in you should help them remember what you're discussing.



## 30. INTRODUCE WEAK POINTS

Introduce the weak points of your ideas early and openly.

This will show you're trustworthy and will widen your credibility. Listeners think that if you're sincere enough to mention your weaknesses, you're probably honest about the rest of your arguments.

Also, it will deter potential enemies to capitalise on your drawbacks and will discourage uncomfortable queries later on.

### Andrew's note:

Sometimes it is better to use the passive voice for weak points as the subject of the action becomes diluted. (i.e.: "*targets were not met*" instead of "*I didn't meet targets.*")



## 31. REGARD REGISTER

When you learn a new word, always ask your teacher for the context in which it can be used. Is it formal? Informal? Does it fit in a speech?

Do not utilise slang, or foul language, even if others do. This could confuse listeners, who do not expect foreigners to use this type of vocabulary.



## 32. FILLERS

Resort to fillers for those seconds you spend looking for words you can't find.

### Examples

As I said  
By the way  
Incidentally  
Now

Often, you cannot afford to stay quiet while you plan what you're going to say next, so introduce fillers to gain time.



### 33. REPEAT, REPEAT & REPEAT

People have weak memories so they'll remember best concepts that you have repeated several times. In fact, repetition is one of the most successful means of teaching, so its effectiveness cannot be disputed.

You don't need to reiterate key points with the same words. Instead go for analogies, quotations, anecdotes, examples, reference to current news or jokes to strengthen your arguments.



### 34. ANALOGIES HELP LISTENERS ABSORB NEW IDEAS

#### Andrew's note:

To speak about an unemployed person who can't find a job, we might make up this analogy:

*"Life, especially during a time of change, is like crossing a desert. The journey seems endless; we get stuck and chase mirages. We can't see our goal. We are not sure of the roads; we don't even know when we've arrived, because that oasis could be another mirage. Only once we've settled again we can say: "I'm safe now".*

Analogies are based on the partial similarity of two things, on which a comparison may be based. One typical example is to talk of the heart as a pump or the economy and an engine.

Analogies help listeners incorporate novel ideas by seeing them through the lens of familiar concepts.

Analogies help listeners understand subtly because it's always easier to grasp complicated matters by comparing them to familiar things.

Analogies are useful when we want to give bad news without offending anyone in particular or when we want to talk about someone without mentioning his or her name.



## 35. QUOTATIONS HELP CREATE RAPPORT WITH THE PUBLIC

Quotations help create common cultural grounds with the audience – i.e.: we've read the same book, listened to the same songs or shared an education, so we have a lot in common.

The public might forget your idea but they will remember your quote, because it links directly to their background and upbringing.

Of course, for quotes to work, they must be shared by the public. Quotes that are familiar only to the speaker do not bring about the personal empathy we are looking for.

### Andrew's note:

Songs are often a good source of quotations: "*let it be*", "*I did it my way*", "*don't worry, be happy*" etc.



## 36. ANECDOTES ADD A HUMAN TOUCH TO IMPERSONAL IDEAS

Anecdotes are simple stories where the person speaking is one of the characters.

They create an aura of sincerity and give cold concepts a human flavour.

Everyone enjoys a story and anecdotes do help distant publics to open up while making the lecturer seem more personable and warm.

However, be careful not to trivialise your arguments by choosing the wrong story.



## 37. EXAMPLES CLARIFY IDEAS

Examples can be presented through any of our senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch or smell).

- Examples provide clarity through their didactic value.
- Examples add power. They show what actually happened while backing up your proposals with tangible cases.
- Examples bring dynamism because it's easier to visualise facts than think about theories.



## 38. NEWS SHOWS HOW YOUR THEORY LINKS TO REAL LIFE

Relate your talk to recent news when you want to show that your ideas are modern and connect with daily life.

News also allows you to develop rapport with your audience, because they work in a similar way to quotations by stressing on shared knowledge.



## 39. JOKES ALLOW THE AUDIENCE TO HAVE FUN & RELAX

Jokes help to break the ice so they're good to start a presentation.

They're also useful just after a particularly dry spell in your speech, because they will dissipate drowsiness and get the public listening to you again. In fact, they're an excellent method to help everyone relax after high-concentration efforts.

- Only use jokes if you are good at telling them.
- Try your jokes out with native friends before – to make sure they work – as humour changes from culture to culture.
- Never offend any minority, even if there are no members of that minority present.



## 40. QUESTION TAGS

Apply tail phrases on leading questions, since they are a legitimate way to make listeners assert to your proposals.

- Question tags ending with negative tail phrases elicit affirmative answers. (*i.e.*: *She will visit us tomorrow, won't she?*)
- Question tags ending with positive tail phrases elicit negative answers (*i.e.*: *You will not make this mistake again, will you?*).



## 41. WAYS TO END

There are several ways to end a presentation. Here we recommend a few:

- Get the audience to move into action by asking them to do something specific.
- Refer back to the introduction, key point, anecdote etc.
- Summarise what you've proposed today.
- Refer forward to the next speaker.
- Say thanks and ask for questions.



## 42. DEAL WITH QUESTIONS

Questions are particularly hard for foreign speakers because (aside from the intrinsic difficulty of the subject exposed) there's also the danger you might not understand the questioner's English.

To avoid some of the uncertainty surrounding this, role play answers to sensitive questions before the speech and don't over extend yourself in your explanations. Just respond as succinctly as possible.

- Limit the scope of your speech by refusing to answer to non-relevant questions. These can later be tackled in private if appropriate.
- Listen attentively and reply to everyone. If you can't respond to a query, explain why.
- Be generous with criticism and do not get involved in confrontations.
- Do not be aggressive or impatient, even if faced with hostile interrogations.
- Carry written data to back up your assumptions and exhibit it if needed.



### 43. NEVER SAY YOU'RE SORRY

Always remember that you're here to speak because attendees have made a gap in their agendas for you. Therefore, respect them at all times.

Check your sources so you don't make mistakes with data. Just one foolish error can wreck an otherwise brilliant presentation.

Arrive early and finish on time. Ending late means you're stealing minutes from the next speaker or from your listeners.

#### Andrew's note:

Nobody will congratulate you if things turn out well, because that is expected. Now, if the micro doesn't work or the slides are not clear, the audience will think, "*We made the effort to come here, so you should have made the effort to organise everything properly*".



### 44. IF A DISASTER HAPPENS...

If there's an outside distraction (noise, a traffic accident etc.) do not try to compete with the interference and wait for a few minutes to see if it subsides. Only then will the public be ready to listen again.

If there is any sort of trouble, do not use it as an excuse to finish off. Explain the problem, adapt your speech to the new environment and go on.

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