

# Communication Skills

Kathy McCoy  
CIS Department  
University of Delaware

# Communication is the Key!

- No matter how good the idea is, it won't go anywhere unless you can get others to believe
- Keys to successful communication:
  - Have something to say (and believe in it)
  - Figure out how to organize it
  - Figure out how to SAY it
  - Practice, practice , practice (rewrite, rewrite, rewrite)
  - Deliver the goods

# Why is Communication Important?

- Doing a good job presenting (writing) will earn you recognition and respect.
- Becoming a good speaker rarely comes naturally.
- Make yourself get better at it by giving more talks!
- Make yourself get better by analyzing what good speakers do.
- Work at it... it's uncomfortable but worth it!
- It actually becomes fun!

# Have something to say...

- Writing a paper/presentation often clarifies/solidifies ideas because the paper needs to tell a full story.
- Papers/presentations have limited time frames – you need to figure out the most important points **AND** figure out how to get them across.
- That means leaving out details
  - That's often tricky!

# Writing Well Means...

- Making something Understandable to the Audience...
- Making something Interesting for the Audience to read (because it is properly motivated)
- A poorly written paper is one where the wrong details are included, or it asks the reader to do too much work. Make it fun to read. Provide the necessary background and materials.

# Writing is Important!

- Writing was one of the most important lessons I learned in graduate school.
- It is important – spend time getting it right!
- Study from good writers.
- Practice writing – and get feedback! (At the same time, be willing to give feedback too!)

# How do you organize a talk/paper

- Start early – “There is no such thing as good writing, only good rewriting.”
- Decide what the “take home message” should be.
- Write down the important points you want to make (in any random order) – don’t forget motivation and “way of looking at the problem.”
- Spend time thinking about pictures/graphs/visual aids to help you make your points.

# Writing Research Papers

- Know your audience
  - Who is on the program committee?
  - What kind of work do they do?
  - What is the style of the conference?
  - What is the assumed knowledge?
- Remember program committee members are busy people
  - Your writing has to be clear and concise. Don't try to say too much!

# Know the Criteria for Acceptance

- Significance
- Technical soundness
- Relevance to conference topic
- Relevant literature cited
- How general is the contribution
- Is the paper well-written/clear?

# Some things to think about...

- Get the reader interested early (remember they're busy...)
- Show the reader how to read and evaluate the work – establish the point of view the reviewer should be taking.
- The paper must be technically sound, but make sure it is understandable to a non-expert.
- Proof the paper and then proof it again!!!

# Get feedback before you send it in!

- Get the draft done early so you can get feedback
- Be prepared for the feedback and think of it as a blessing (grow a thick skin)
- Get it to your advisor **REAL** early
- Give it to your friends – and learn how to read your papers in return
- Let the people reading it for you know what the criteria are

# Planning an Oral Presentation

- Know the audience
- Know the amount of time that you have
  - Plan for the time – don't try to fit in more
  - Think of short conference talks as advertisements to get the people to read the paper (where they find out the real details)
- Know the expectations for the type of talk
  - Formal presentation (short or long)
  - Informal presentation with questions
  - Discussion

# Short Formal Talks

- These are hard
  - This is a one shot deal – make it count
  - Know your points and make sure they come out
  - Be neat, tidy, logical, unambiguous

# Practice Makes Perfect

- Practice is especially important for a timed conference paper presentation.

# The Practice Method

- Determine the talk and generate the slides
- Write out exactly word-for-word what you plan to say on each slide
- Run through the talk out loud to yourself with the slides and notes on print-outs in front of you
  - Note mistakes in the slides
  - Jot notes on places that just “don’t seem to work”
  - Note how much too long the talk is

# Still Practicing...

- Think about/act on the results of the practice
  - Does the overall talk work?
  - Is it reasonably close to the right amount of time or do I have to cut major chunks?
  - Fix the slides
  - Rewrite the text to fix those rough spots that were noted (sometimes this means re-ordering or working in a new transition or significantly changing a couple of slides)

# Still Practicing...

- Practice it again to yourself out loud.
- If the talk is getting pretty good, do it again, this time standing up and don't depend on the notes.
- Make sure you are speaking SLOWLY – you should get the timing almost perfect.
  - Getting the timing perfect may mean rewriting some parts!
- Now you are ready to do a practice talk for your friends!
  - This is a really important step!

# The Dry Run...

- NOTE: it is often harder to give a talk to your friends and colleagues than it is to a large audience that doesn't know you.
- Make sure you are doing this early enough so you will be able to incorporate their comments!
- Lay the ground rules for the dry run – make sure they know where you are giving the talk (what kind of audience), how long you have, whether you can be interrupted, etc...

# Still on the dry run...

- Deliver the talk as if it were the real thing
  - Smile
  - Be confident
  - Look them (all) in the eye
  - Be enthusiastic about (all) the material
  - Speak SLOWLY
  - Speak clearly
  - Modulate your voice emphasizing the important points

# More on the Dry Run

- Listen carefully to the comments
  - Be grateful for every comment you get! (Remember, you don't need to incorporate them if you don't like them, but another viewpoint is *ALWAYS* helpful.)
  - Pay particular attention if someone is confused or didn't understand a point that was made – that really needs to be fixed!
- Rewrite the talk on the basis of the comments
- Go practice it for yourself again!

# At the Conference

- It is natural to be nervous
- Check out the set-up in advance (take that stresser away)
  - It is best if you can actually TRY the media in advance
  - Ask for help if something doesn't work right
  - Know what “signals” for time you will get
- Remain confident – you KNOW this material and it is GOOD – now show them!

# Overcoming Speaking Anxiety

- A quote from Lenny Laskowski:

The first and most important [way to reduce speaking anxiety] of all is preparation. I like to think of it as the 9 P's: **P**rior **P**roper **P**reparation **P**revents **P**oor **P**erformance of the **P**erson **P**utting on the **P**resentation.

# Handling Questions

- LISTEN to the question.
- THINK before you answer.
- Repeat the question (this is good for you and good for the audience who may not have heard it clearly).
- If you can't answer a question, just say so!
  - Offer to research the question and get back to them.
  - Suggest sources where the answer might be found.
  - (Confidently) ask for suggestions from the audience.

# Summing it Up

- Communicating your ideas clearly is an important skill.
- This skill needs to be worked at – and it is often uncomfortable to work at it!
- The more you do it, the easier it becomes – but that fear really doesn't ever go away! That's a good thing – *WANT* to tell them something.
- Never let them see you sweat!
- Keep up the confidence and enthusiasm!

# References

- Effective Presentations Tutorials by Jeff Radel  
<http://www.kumc.edu/SAH/OTEd/jradel/effective.html>
- Overcoming Speaking Anxiety in Meetings & Presentations By Lenny Laskowski: <http://www.allbiz.com/newroot/zoom.asp?storyID=40533&szparent=2936&action=display&SessionID=168637&zoneID=2936&infoType=Articles>
- So long, and thanks for the Ph.D.! by Ronald T. Azuma  
<http://www.cs.unc.edu/~azuma/hitch4.html>