

BASIC RHETORICAL CONCEPTS

This handout has two parts. Part 1 is a list with 11 questions you may ask in order to analyse and assess oral presentation. The questions contain some basic rhetorical concepts which are highlighted in bold and explained in part 2.

Part 1: Questions regarding oral presentation.

1. Who is the **sender**, and how do you assess the sender's **reliability**?
2. What is the sender's **purpose**, and do they fulfil their purpose?
3. Who are the **receivers**, and what is their aim?
4. What is the sender's **focus**, and does the sender stick to their focus?
5. How do the **arguments** work?
6. What is the balance between the sender's appeal to the receiver's **rational and emotional sides**?
7. How does **the language** work?
8. What does the sender do at **the beginning** to attract the receiver's attention?
9. What does the sender do in the **main part** to keep the receiver's attention?
10. How does the **ending** work?
11. How do the sender's **voice, body, facial expressions** and **gestures** work?

Part 2: Basic rhetorical concepts

Sender: The person speaking and/or the organisation the sender represents.

Credibility The trustworthy sender

- knows what they are talking about
- is a person the receiver can trust
- shows goodwill towards the receiversⁱ

Purpose: The sender's purpose of speaking/writing. Traditionally, a distinction is made between three different overall purposes:

- enlighten, inform
- gain support for a viewpoint
- entertainⁱⁱ

Receiver: The person or group of people listening to the sender. Normally, receivers are listening to be informed, to consider if they should adopt viewpoints, or to be entertained. However, receivers may also be listening in order to assess. It is not very often that

assessment is the overall purpose in oral communication, but this is the case in job interviews and at exams, for instance.

Focus: The point or principal message the sender wishes to communicate to the receivers. Both sender and receiver find the focus by asking: *What does the sender wish to tell to whom, and why?* If their answers are identical, the focus is clear.

Argumentation: Can be generally defined as “arguments including a minimum of two items of information, one giving the reasons for the other”ⁱⁱⁱ. The sender is seeking the receiver’s support regarding one or more *claims* based on or more examples of *evidence*. The claim is the viewpoint for which the sender is seeking support. The evidence is the information given by the sender as direct support of their claim. For instance: You must exercise (claim) because this is good for your health (evidence).

Rational and emotional sides: In oral presentation both the receivers’ rational and emotional sides are affected. The sender speaks to the receiver’s rational side by presenting cases and arguments. The sender speaks to the receiver’s emotional side by appealing to their sense of humour and imagination, for instance. In an oral context we should not underestimate the receivers’ emotional side. If the receivers are confused, irritated or insecure, for instance, it may be difficult to get a message through to them. In some oral situations there may be a need to speak a great deal to the receiver’s emotional side, for instance in a speech to your granny’s 75th birthday. In other situations, it is necessary to speak a great deal to the receiver’s rational side, e.g. in an oral exam.

Language: For the receivers it is essential that the sender uses transparent and clear language. Transparent language means that the receivers’ do not need to spend energy on understanding and figuring out what the sender might mean. Transparent language is characterised by:

- the use of keywords
- definitions of words that might need explaining
- consistent use of the same term for essential concepts
- highlighting and repetition of essential points

Clear language means that the receivers notice the sender’s use of terms and see things clearly. Clear language is characterised by:

- concrete examples
- concrete details
- combinations of words with contrasting meaning
- rhetorical questions

Beginning: What the sender says first. At the beginning it is important to attract the receivers' attention and win their goodwill.

Main part: Main parts may be very different and constructed according to different principles

- Cases, arguments in favour of a claim, arguments against a claim
- Cases, examples
- Problem, solution
- A number of sections in which the problem statement is investigated, overall discussion of the problem investigation sections

Conclusion: What the sender says in conclusion. When concluding, it is important to re-emphasise the focus in order that the receivers understand why it was worth listening. The sender must prepare their last sentence carefully so as *not* to end up with conclusions such as "that was all, I think" or "now I think time is up".

Voice: In an oral context, the sender's voice is absolutely essential. The sender must make sure to speak at a pace that enables the receivers to process the information; they should remember to pause regularly and articulate carefully to ensure that all words can be heard.

Body: The sender's body language must not impede the message. If the sender feels they are blushing or their hands are shaking, it is best to just accept this. The sender who is trying to cover up their blushing or shaking would be spending energy on themselves rather than on their audience.

Facial expressions: Facial expressions and eye contact in particular are very important. A sender who is speaking without making eye contact with the receivers, is sending the signal that the receivers are unimportant.

Gestures: Hand movements should help underline what is being said. Sometimes hands may impede the message because they are shaking. Usually the shaking is worst at the beginning of a presentation, and therefore it may be a good idea to place your hands on a firm surface, for instance a table, or to clasp them behind your back.

ⁱ See Aristotle (1983/1991): *Rhetoric*. Translated into Danish by Thure Hastrup, who also wrote the introduction. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum:

ⁱⁱ See Cicero (2003): *De Oratore in Rhetorical Writings*. Second volume translated into Danish by M. Leisner-Jensen, Thure Hastrup and Jacob Isager. Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark

ⁱⁱⁱ Jørgensen, Charlotte & Onsberg, Merete (2008): *Argumentation in practice* [Praktisk argumentation] Third edition. Copenhagen: Nyt Teknisk Forlag (publisher)