Adapting During the Speech

Inquire: Adapting Your Presentation

Overview

Adapting to your audience during a presentation is one of the most important public speaking skills you can learn. You will be seen as more credible, and you will feel more confident as you present. This lesson will explain how to adapt to your audience, pause and refocus as needed, assess the speaking environment, and roll with the presentation.

Big Question: What tactics have you seen a public speaker use to adapt to an audience?

Watch: How to Adapt During a Speech

Audience adaptation is something you do during a speech. If you do it well, correct adaptation sets you up to succeed. This lesson will teach you how to identify three kinds of audience nonverbal reactions: positive, neutral, and negative. Once you know the nonverbal reactions of an audience, it is easier to know what kind of adaptations to make. If there are more neutral reactions, try humor or anecdotes to get people more involved. If there is a large amount of negative reactions, ask questions about or clarify the presentation material that seemed to cause the negative reactions. If you see many positive reactions, keep doing exactly what you have been doing, because it’s working!

After you learn about audience reactions, you will learn the importance of pausing to refocus. Sometimes, you need to regroup, and if that means you need to take a pause, that’s okay! Silence can be a powerful tool during a presentation, so use it to your benefit. You’ll also learn to use questions as opportunities to refocus your presentation.

Next, you’ll learn to assess the room you present in to know how to adapt. Large rooms with many people will need you to adapt by speaking more loudly. Small rooms will require you to speak more quietly. Sometimes, ambient noise will impact how your present. The most important thing is to roll with the punches. Not always will you be able to adapt, so being able to adjust and accept that you can’t be perfect is necessary.

As you learn about audience adaptation, think of a presentation you have seen. How did the speaker deal with audience questions? How did they deal with people talking amongst each other or laughing out of place? These situations require the speaker to adapt, and this lesson will give you the tools to conquer them.
Read: Adapting as You Go

Overview

Adapting to your audience as you speak can be a challenging task. As you become more comfortable presenting information, it becomes easier to adapt and interact with the messages your audience sends you. This lesson will look at strategies you can use to adapt mid-presentation: identifying audience nonverbal reactions, refocusing as needed, assessing the speaking environment around you, rolling with the punches, and working through complications as they arise.

Audience Nonverbal Reactions

Nonverbals are messages sent without words. As you present, there are three categories of nonverbals you may receive from members of your audience: positive, neutral, and negative reactions.

Positive reactions are smiles, nods, and people paying attention and following along. When you notice these people, focus on them. Other reactions might throw you off, but those positive reactions can drive you to succeed even more. If you have sections where you interact with members of your audience, those with positive nonverbal reactions are the people that will more than likely interact with you in the way you want them to.

Neutral reactions come from people who might be paying attention but generally seem uninterested. Their faces are blank, and they may be checking their phones or staring at the wall instead of you. Neutral reactions might occur not because of anything you are doing, but for other reasons affecting the person sending the nonverbal signals. In general, don’t let these reactions get to you. Your presentation is fine. Just because some people aren’t interested doesn’t mean you should feel bad about your performance.

Negative reactions are frowns, people shaking their heads, or in extreme instances, people who heckle. These reactions are the hardest to deal with, but know that it’s okay if someone disagrees with you. You don’t have to convince everyone or please everyone. Focus on the people sending positive reactions and ignore the negative reactions. You’ll feel more confident as you become better at focusing on those positive reactions.

Pausing to Refocus

Sometimes when you are giving a speech, something will throw you off or make you decide to change your message. If that happens, it is okay to pause. Take a breath, and refocus. It reflects well on you if you are able to take a situation that isn’t going according to plan, roll with it, and come out better on the other side.

It is also okay if you need a moment longer than a breath. Silence isn’t necessarily something to avoid. If you need to take a pause, you can. That silence can be an opportunity for the audience to consider the information you have presented to them. Take time to regroup, so that you’re back on your feet and ready to go.

If the silence seems awkward, ask the audience a question. Getting the audience to contribute and offer their thoughts gives you valuable insight into what the audience is thinking while also giving you time to refocus.
Assessing Your Environment

As you speak, it is important to make the most of the room you are in. **Proxemics** deals with the amount of space people feel necessary to set between themselves and others. Take into consideration the space between you and your audience. Is it a large room? A small room? Are you close to your audience? Far away? All of these things matter as you adapt. In a small room, you might adapt your presentation by lowering the volume. If it’s a large room, you might adapt to be louder so everyone can hear you. Being able to identify situations like these early on will help you perform your best.

**Ambient noises** are background noises that people usually overlook. Things such as a projector fan, air conditioning, phone noises, and people talking in a hallway are all examples of ambient noises. These noises can impact your presentation, and you should be aware of them. If a loud fan turns on during your presentation, adapt to it and speak more loudly. If a phone goes off, keep going rather than letting it distract you and sidetrack the speech. As you present, be aware of what technology is available to you in the room, what technology you will need, and what you will do if something goes wrong. Having backup plans will help you adapt to any technical difficulties that might present themselves.

Finally, it is important to know if the room has a whiteboard, a table, or other presentation resources. It is important to have the resources you need and to be able to adapt if you need something that isn’t available. If you plan to draw something on a whiteboard and there isn’t one, or if the marker is dried out, what do you do? Being able to adapt and keep going is crucial to the success of your presentation.

Rolling with the Punches

As you present, there will be things you won’t be able to adapt to. You should strive to adapt to the things you can, but there will be circumstances that you have no control over, and all speakers accept that. Be confident enough to do your best, and don’t let the things you can’t control impact your performance. Learn as you go. If something goes wrong, don’t dwell on it. Learn from it. Use what you learn to adapt in the future. Change the parts of your presentation that you can, accept that you can’t always change what you’d like to, and commit to improving as you go. Doing these things will make you a better presenter.

Reflect Poll: How You Interact

What kind of audience interaction do you prefer from public speakers?
- Questions
- Activities
- Discussions

Expand: Audience Interaction

Overview

One way to adapt to an audience is to interact with them. As you present, some people will learn or react better if you find ways to engage them. This section will give you three strategies to engage your audience.
Interacting with Your Audience

Questions allow you to interact with your audience. First, they can preview content. If you think you have given your audience a thorough introduction to the next point, you can ask whether that’s so. Or, you can ask the audience to comment on material you’ve covered. You can also ask questions to probe what your audience knows about a topic before you start talking. Questions are a versatile way to engage and interact with your audience. Questions also provide the audience a low risk, low effort opportunity to be engaged with your presentation. It’s important to note that just because someone doesn’t answer a question doesn’t mean they aren’t engaged. Getting people to think about your topic engages them, even if they aren’t willing to verbalize their answer.

Using activities is a more involved way to get audiences to participate. This strategy requires the audience to be heavily invested in your presentation, so it’s better to include any activities at the end of a presentation and not at the beginning. Activities at the start can be helpful if you know the audience is willing to participate. Classroom settings, or any kind of recurring audience, are great examples of audiences that might be willing to participate in an activity at the beginning of a presentation. These activities provide an opportunity for your audience to apply the material they learn from you. They also bring a more interactive element to the presentation that lets people who need active learning strategies feel more involved in the learning process.

Discussions are the final tool. These tend to be a blend of activities and questions. Discussions usually start with a question and evolve from there. They allow the same kind of thinking and application as an activity without as much involvement from the audience. Discussions allow the audience to have a back-and-forth with you, and with each other. They can build on the presentation material and build a deeper understanding for all involved.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

An article explaining how to encourage questions from your audience

- Link to resource: https://speakingaboutpresenting.com/audience/presentation-question-time/

An article providing tips on making your presentation more interesting for your audience

- Link to resource: https://blog.prezi.com/8-ways-to-make-your-presentation-more-interactive/

An article providing tips on making your audience more engaged with your presentation

- Link to resource: http://www.wilderpresentations.com/uncategorized/12-most-engaging-presenter-behaviors-to-keep-your-audience-awake

Lesson Glossary

**nonverbals**: messages sent that do not use words  
**proxemics**: the amount of space people set between themselves and others  
**ambient noises**: background noises that many people overlook in their daily lives
Check Your Knowledge

1. Questions are a low risk way to engage your audience.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Activities make for great ice breakers at the beginning of a presentation.
   a. True
   b. False

3. Discussions are a mix between the advantages of questions and activities.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:
1. A  2. B  3. A

Citations

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