

# Speaking at an AALL Meeting or Lights, Camera, Action! at a Continuing Ed Event

by Kay M. Todd

*Professional Perspectives—Tools and Techniques of the Trade.* The Professional Development Committee encourages members to continue to explore topics after presentations at the local, regional, and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Mary A. Hotchkiss at 206/553-4475 or hotchma@u.washington.edu.

## Who Am I?

First, a tip of the hat to all of those who are far more qualified than I to write an article about making an effective presentation. "They" all have academic degrees in public speaking, or significant course work in public speaking or presenting information in a lecture situation, or train others in these very skills. I am or have none of those. Of training, formal or informal my resume includes little. My current employer once sent lawyers and me to Speakeasy sessions which included two Saturdays and several evenings of training and video-taping. I was also once fortunate to attend a TRIPLL event where I was similarly video-taped and where I learned tips on doing presentations more effectively from a number of skilled speakers.



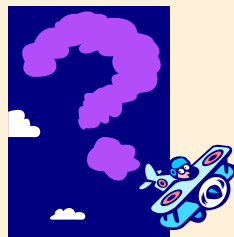
I will also note that in recent years my work for the firm has required me to present information to clients, either describing the work that I do in preparing affirmative action programs, or explaining statistical calculations which have been prepared for a client, in order to facilitate their understanding. In those situations, I am usually the sole presenter, using handouts and overhead transparencies, and often creating agendas for those meetings to ensure that the necessary content is covered. Added to that, I am a critical observer of presentations by others and my own most severe critic and Monday morning quarterback. That said, here is my advice to those who are fortunate to take the podium at an AALL meeting and face an audience of their peers.

## Setting the Stage, or How Did This Happen?

Ten or eleven months before the next AALL meeting, your phone rings.

An opportunity of a lifetime.

Someone has heard of your experience or expertise in a particular area (or you fit the demographic profile for a needed additional speaker) and you are asked to speak at the next meeting. Eager for the professional recognition that will result, you accept with scarcely a second thought. A vast majority of those who agree spend roughly the next seven months doing nothing to prepare for the speech, but being excited about the opportunity. The first real-life deadline that intrudes on your euphoria is the handout deadline—which is typically two months before the presentation. This deadline is for materials to be included in the bound program materials which are distributed to all registrants when they arrive.



Research on adult learning has indicated that adults learn in different ways. The effectiveness of the learning experience is enhanced when the live presentation is reinforced by printed materials which support it, duplicate the live presentation, or suggest to the listener areas for additional information on the topic. Through the efforts of AALL's Director of Programs Martha Brown, and the two-year old Professional Development Committee, AALL has taken a close look at how we present programming and the learning outcomes anticipated from each program to ensure that they are attained. Given this emphasis by AALL, printed accompanying materials have taken on increasing importance. From a pragmatic standpoint, the preparation of advance printed materials provides the stimulation

to actually begin preparation for your speech. The printed materials in the bound volumes actually may attract attendees to your presentation, and they certainly indicate your respect for the audience and your desire to ensure that they gain specific information from your presentation.

So, prepare advance materials. If your topic is important enough to be on the program, it deserves written materials. Those written materials may be an outline of your speech, a bibliography, or several on-point articles that have shaped your discussion. And if it's your speech outline, then you're on your way.

## Preparing the Content

How you write a speech or how you prepare the content of your presentation is subject to your own habits and preferences, and is not something that I can dictate to you. Let's assume that you really do have expertise on the topic you were asked to speak about. That will eliminate from our discussion the disingenuous presenter who announces his or her presentation by saying "I didn't know anything about this subject until they asked me to speak about it." (One of my personal favorites for an intro.) As you prepare your presentation, however, a question of first importance is what type of document will form the basis for your presentation. Will it be a fully paragraphed prose document with appropriate linkages between paragraphs, which you expect to read? That would be well within an accepted academic format for presenting papers; however, that is not a format which is common at AALL meetings. More common is the speech based on a more limited document or outlined format. In this case, the document is not read but is the basis for a more free-flowing discussion. Short of total memorization of a prose document, only an outline will enable a presenter to speak while focused on the audience.

# A Desktop Learning Opportunity

Any training session on public speaking includes content on the importance of looking your audience squarely in the eye, moving your gaze throughout the audience and gaining eye contact with as many of your listeners as possible (neglecting of course the difficulties associated with eye contact with a large audience, near-sightedness, or blinding stage lights).

Even if you speak from an outline, you still must not lose the logical progression which a prose document would have, and which is essential to your presentation. Your listeners will know whether your content has a flow. You can create an artificial overlay that will help them to organize your information, but the need for content that flows logically, one element from the previous one, with an introduction at the beginning, is still essential to your presentation.

## Preparing Your Presentation—Initial Stages

Time passes, and your content is prepared. The outline of your presentation is a document from which you can work, with variations in type face and outline elements that will enable you to follow it as you present. I will not here debate the virtues of a computer screen to contain your content, except to note what I believe to be the importance of mobility for you during your presentation. If you are physically linked to moving text on a computer screen, you will need to be in front of that screen, which probably means behind the podium.

## The Rule of Three

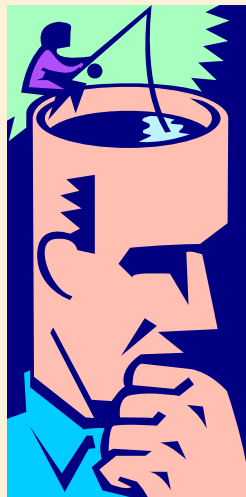
Those who train in public speaking often enunciate a “rule of three” in order to describe how speaking content should be organized. Under the rule of three, a speaker should tell the audience what he’s going to tell them; then tell them (present the content); and finally tell them what he has told them. This rule of three is admittedly a gross simplification. Nonetheless, the principle is sound. By first describing in a very brief

manner what your premise or content will be, you prepare the audience to receive that information. Then you actually present the substance. Finally, in order to reinforce the learning experience, and reiterate your premise and conclusions, you remind them what you have told them.

One final comment on content, that is more in the nature of an exhortation: Have solid content. Otherwise, everything you do about your on-stage performance will be insignificant and your presentation will fail. Without solid content, there’s no reason for your audience to continue to listen to you.

## Preparing the Live Presentation

First, plan to have a significant number of actual, real-time, full run-throughs of your presentation prior to the event. Given the time pressures of the rest of your life, it’s probably unrealistic to expect that you will find the time for practice runs more than two weeks prior to the convention, or about the time that real panic begins. If you start earlier, fine, but two weeks is probably ample advance time. These trial runs should be designed to conform your presentation to the time available to you, and, most importantly, to give you a sense of comfort with your content. Set twenty dress rehearsals as your goal. The first several will be rocky, and it’s tempting to consider some efforts to be best abandoned after the first several minutes. However, the better plan is to push through to the end each time. Otherwise, you run the risk of using your available time to polish the first portion of your program, being less attentive to the later elements.



## Opening in Vegas (or Wherever)

How do you open your presentation? That’s a matter of personal preference, but don’t let the lack of good opening lines delay your dress rehearsals. Instead, begin with the content and assume that the opening lines that will connect you to the

prior speaker or to the day or place, will come to you at least within the moments before you begin.

Consider also your personal style. Can you tell a joke? If the answer is an uncertain yes, it’s probably better to avoid opening jokes as the best way to warm up your audience. Bob Berring and Lollie Gasaway are two of the most effective speakers among current AALL members and listening to them is a delight. They are gifted speakers who have the ability to make us laugh by telling funny stories or ad libbing apparently at will; however, most of us lack that gift and it’s far better to acknowledge that fact and create introductory sentences that will create a connection with your audience, rather than use failed techniques that won’t work for you.

Other opening options include comments that connect you to an earlier speaker, if you are a second or later presenter on a panel. Another option is to connect with your audience by telling a personal anecdote with applicability to your current situation, referring to events or activities known by all at the event you’re attending. The important thing is to use the first moments of your presentation to create a true connection with your audience. The connection should indicate to them that you are enthusiastic, which is key to their response to your presentation. If you are excited and interested in the topic about which you are speaking, your audience will be also. Avoid generally self-deprecating comments about your presentation or your speaking skills.

These opening moments are also ones in which you can demonstrate respect for your audience. I’m always impressed by speakers who can remember to ask questions about the background of the audience, and their experience or expertise in the subject area. The time spent asking for a show of hands on a couple of critical questions is minimal. However, that effort can spare a speaker from focusing an inordinate amount of time on an aspect of this subject with which most of the audience is already highly familiar. Admittedly, last minute adjustments are difficult; however, the

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knowledge can be utilized at least to create a verbal tip of the hat to that expertise or information.

## Dressing for the Event

A trivial point, I know, but worth a brief mention, is the question of what a speaker should wear. This is of course a personal choice, but the important factor is that whatever you wear, you should choose clothes you are comfortable in, and that won't create a distraction for you as you worry about a jacket lapel that has never laid flat, a skirt that is too long (too short), or a shirt collar that is not appropriate for the tie that you are wearing. Best of all, wear clothes that you love, and perhaps even clothes that typically generate compliments when you wear them.

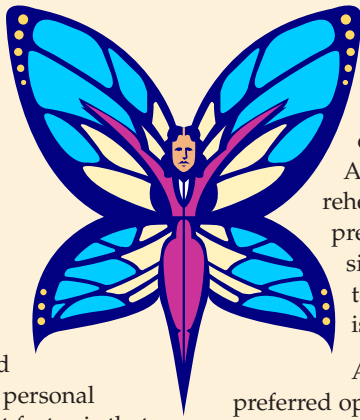
## Props

As your dress rehearsals improve and the time before the convention shortens, your rehearsals should get more like the real event. If you plan to present from behind the podium, simulate a podium for your dress rehearsals.

Provide a way to place your notes at the typical angle provided by a podium and speak from those notes with your eyes moving from the notes to an

imaginary audience. Best of all, arrange your podium simulation in front of a mirror and engage in eye contact with your self. This can be somewhat intimidating and you may be tempted to avoid eye contact; however, persevere and your efforts will be rewarded.

Better yet, plan to present away from the podium. In some room arrangements, this can be somewhat difficult. Even if you are part of a panel, there is often a podium on the raised platform. If this podium is at one end of a panel, then stepping out from behind the podium and presenting alongside it is a simple matter. If there is a center podium you may still be able to use



a microphone with a long cord or the clip-on speaker's microphone with a long cord, and step to one side or the other of the speaker's table.

At any rate, do your dress rehearsals without a podium. This prepares you for the optimum situation and it is easy to return to podium presentation if that is all the room offers.

A clip-on mike is really the preferred option. Nonetheless, assume that at worst you will have a hand-held microphone with a long cord. To prepare for this type of presentation, do your later run-throughs with a prop that is similar to a microphone, holding it in the hand which you are most comfortable using for this purpose. Find a household object that is comfortable in your hand and hold it in front of your mouth and slightly below it as you would a real microphone. Some obvious options are the microphone from a home Karaoke machine or a children's Mr. Microphone game. Remember that when your mouth leaves the immediate proximity of the mike, the audience loses your voice. All of us have listened to presentations where the speaker turned to

look at all areas of the audience, losing voice contact with the mike when they addressed either the right or left side of the audience. That can be a frustrating experience for a listener and may cause your audience to disconnect from your presentation.

## Generally Speaking ...

As your familiarity with your presentation increases, you will have the opportunity to think about other general aspects of your presentation. One of these is the speaking habits you have that may distract from your presentation. These may include annoying habits, like mine, of playing with a pen and its cap, which I think I finally conquered. Some of these habits may be impossible for you to detect. As we hear ourselves speaking, we don't necessarily know whether we say "uh" more frequently than we use a verbal comma. You can begin to get an idea of what speech mannerisms may be recurring as you speak. You probably do know if you are off the verbal speedometer, or if normally alert people have been known to fall asleep while you

struggle to say a single sentence. In either of those cases, be attentive to this problem and consider taping some part of one of your dry runs after you have made an effort to ameliorate this problem. One last word on these rehearsal sessions: Consider the run-through where you get lost in your notes or omit a part of your text to be an excellent experience, because this will surely happen at some point during your real presentation, and it will benefit you to be able to ad-lib while you find your place or to show no indication that you are disconcerted about information that you omitted. Remember, your audience has not heard your presentation in its most perfect format and has nothing to which to compare the actual event. In addition, you should use these advance weeks to sharpen your presentation skills. Remember that you have speaking engagements throughout every day. Every phone call, every casual conversation with a colleague offers you a chance to speak clearly, convey enthusiasm, and otherwise use your presentation skills. Best hold the auditorium level voice projection for the real thing.

## The Final Hour

All of your advanced preparation and rehearsals may be wasted if you fail to avail yourself of an opportunity to check the room beforehand. Even an experienced speaker takes an opportunity to arrive early enough to check the room arrangement and the equipment. Ideally, the room will be empty for some period of time before your session, but this may not be the case. If it is not, consider doing a room check before the first session of the day in that room. This would enable you to be in the room, review the arrangement of audience seating, stand on the raised platform, and move around enough to feel comfortable in the space. Arriving early or checking early also offers the opportunity to check the level of the microphone, using a friend or AV tech to listen from the back of the room and indicate whether you are clearly audible. You will also want to check for feedback on the microphone as you move away from the podium and potentially change the angle to the speakers. Use this time also to confirm the projection screen, and computer or overhead projector availability. If you are using an overhead presentation, you can check the projection with your document



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to ensure that all of it is visible on the screen and that it's as large and clear as possible.

## You're On!

Yes, it's here. They've introduced you and you're taking the mike. Or the previous speaker on the panel has concluded and indicated that you will continue the discussion.

Months of preparation and the numerous dry-runs have given you comfort with the content and with your presentation. That is not to say something can't or won't go wrong.

You may be the fifth panelist in a program that started late and where every panelist exceeded his time limit. You may also follow the most wonderful presentation in the world, and know that yours will pale by comparison. None of those things really matters, and they're certainly all beyond your control. So take the mike and project enthusiasm



for your subject and comfort in your presentation. Assume that some of your audience will stand up and leave, either because they came to your program by mistake, want to hear a few minutes of all seven programs presented in the same time slot, or have personal reasons for doing so. Don't let those departures distract you. Indicate to the audience when and how you would like to receive questions. If you are comfortable and if your subject matter lends itself to this method, feel free to indicate that you will take questions at any time. If, however, your topic will benefit from your presentation without interruptions, or you do not feel comfortable resuming your presentation after an interruption for questions, then indicate that you will take questions at the end. Then, at the time you have allotted for questions, do not assume that an absence of questions, which is the most

typical situation, is a negative comment on your presentation. Many AALL presentations are not followed by audience questions. Many that are not followed by questions leave an interested group chatting informally with presenters at the end. In terms of audience satisfaction, assume that a small percent will think you were fabulous, a similar small percent will think your presentation or your content was poor, and the remainder will likely have a strongly favorable response to your presentation. If you review program evaluations after the event, keep this general rule in mind.

And finally, remember that every speaker has had a few events he would rather forget. When the bulb fails on the projector, the microphone won't work, or you get hopelessly lost midway through your presentation, remember that it happens to everyone and chalk it up to experience.

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