

Ideas for promoting oral skill development in the Tutorial

1. Set the stage - from the start, strive to make students feel comfortable and confident in their classroom interactions. A first-day icebreaker like introducing yourself, providing some detail about your reactions to Grinnell, why you chose the Tutorial topic, etc. will help to ease them into talking about themselves right from the start. Self-disclosure exercises are important to promote an atmosphere of mutual goodwill. Small group interactions also help to break down inhibitions among the less talkative students.
2. Use very short, regular oral assignments as a way of stimulating participation from each student. Make sure that students understand the importance of being prepared for oral exchange before they come to class. If a student speaks early during a given class period, chances are very high for additional interventions.
(i.e. Ask students to prepare an answer to a question for the next class period "What in your opinion was the most interesting/useful/provocative point presented in today's reading?")
3. Vary assignment types: agree/disagree, debate, panel discussion, prepared questions for discussion, select and present a salient passage, role play, etc.
4. Emphasize the similarities between successful oral and written assignments. Some coordination of topics may also be desirable (written answer to a question, followed by an oral rendition -not mad- of the answer). Stress the importance of overall organization, constructing a convincing argument and providing textual evidence.
5. Make students aware of their role as listeners. Develop listening skills by having students comment on other student presentations (summarize main points; agree/disagree, etc.), summarize a class discussion (5 minutes before the end of class one student will recount the class discussion), respond in some way to a previous comment made in a discussion before being able to offer another comment, etc.
6. As with written assignments, make clear to students what is expected of them in an oral assignment, and on what basis they will be evaluated.
7. Let students talk freely about their anxieties and frustrations. Engage in metacognitive activities: have a discussion about how the discussions are going, why they get bogged down, what are the elements of a good discussion, etc. Similarly, let them feel free to comment on their own performance in oral presentations or discussions (i.e., one on one in your office after a formal oral assignment, with a small group at intervals, etc.) When given the opportunity, students tend to be more critical of their oral work than their instructors.
8. Provide multiple opportunities for practice and improvement. Progress and ease in oral communication require practice (assignments of graduated length and difficulty) and feedback in a relatively non-threatening atmosphere. The Tutorial is a perfect setting for real development in this area.
9. No oral assignment should take away from valuable class time, but rather should provide greater and more focussed interaction among students. Try to limit the longest presentations to 5 minutes. This limit puts the focus on quality of ideas and effective presentation. Allow students to interact with the speaker immediately following a presentation.
10. Frequent short oral assignments also encourage students to keep up with the reading and to become more thoughtful and critical of what they and others say.
11. Keep in mind that students are at their best when they have something specific to prepare. When they know in advance what they are expected to do in the next class, they will be more likely to take the assignment seriously, and not put it off. If they are required to prepare only one simple idea to share in the next class, you will already have built in a stepping stone to fuller participation and a starting point for the next day's discussion. It takes a few extra minutes of instructor time to anticipate the next class' direction, but it is usually well worth the effort.

CHECKLIST (exhaustive to be sure!) for oral assignments

(might be used as a preparatory sheet by students to remind them of the key features of oral presentation; as an evaluation sheet for the instructor; or even as a check list for evaluation by classmates)

Categories I-V (in bold) might have assigned numerical scores to more easily assess performance in each area.

I. Making contact: Speaker and listeners

Does the speaker “engage” the interest of the listener or must the listener make efforts to “enter” the world of the speaker?

Is the listener able to identify the thesis, the main idea, or the general thrust of the presentation from the start?

Is articulation generally clear or are some words missed by the attentive listener?

Is the speaker’s voice audible or must we strain to hear? Is there behavior that may be distracting?

Does the speaker seem aware of his/her listeners?

Does the speaker go too fast, or stick too closely to a prepared text, reading rather than speaking to the listeners?

II. Presentation and development of ideas

Does the speaker proceed in an organized fashion from one idea to the next? Is the listener able to follow?

Is there adequate supporting evidence to help the speaker make his/her points effectively?

Is the supporting evidence convincing as evidence even if one might not be in total agreement with it?

Does the speaker differentiate between major and minor points?

Does the speaker maintain the listeners’ interest in the topic throughout, or did the speaker appear at times to lose sight of the topic?

Is the speaker’s interest in the subject communicated through appropriate emphasis in the voice, eye contact, and gesture when appropriate?

In the converse, does the speaker seem to concentrate too much on the presentation style at the expense of the ideas presented?

Is the listener engaged in the content because the ideas are well chosen, appropriate and interesting?

Is the level of discourse (sentence structure, word choice, precision of ideas) appropriate for a formal presentation or does it seem overly “colloquial”?

Is there economy of expression (words well chosen so that the maximum can be stated in a limited amount of time)? Did there seem to be unnecessary repetition or remarks unrelated to the topic at hand?

III. Conclusion and beyond

Is there a sense of “closure” to the presentation? Did it seem to “trail off” or come to an abrupt end?

Is the listener uncertain about what ideas were supposed to have been communicated? Are questions or

clarification needed before the listener can digest and react to the ideas presented?

Did the listener have the sense of a summing up or synthesis of the major points?

Did the listener find the presentation informative and/or intellectually stimulating? Does the listener experience a desire to pursue points of interest with the speaker or on his/her own?

IV. Response to assignment

Did the presentation meet the guidelines of the assignment?

Was the recommended time respected or did the presentation seem too long or short?

Does the listener come away with a better understanding and/or appreciation for the ideas presented as they related to the assignment?

V. Overall reaction of the listener

What did you find most satisfactory in the presentation?

What did you find least satisfactory? What changes would you recommend?

Would you have been satisfied with yourself if you had made this presentation?