

# Back to the Basics

or better yet...

# Back to the Classics



Once upon a time, two managers were each asked to give a presentation on budget proposals that they wanted the company to adopt.

The first victim, Linda, sat there paralyzed while the moisture left her mouth. She could only nod yes as her boss left her office. She then forced the unpleasant task from her mind. The day before the presentation, the panic set in and she spent a few minutes thinking about what she wanted to say. The next day, after a sleepless night, she grabbed some charts and numbers, walked into the meeting room and winged her way through her “presentation.”

The second manager in our cautionary tale, Bob, told the boss he would be happy to give a presentation. He grabbed his favorite books on public speaking for reference and set to work. Opening up his PowerPoint program, he started typing out his thoughts in crisp bullet points not forgetting to start out with a great joke he heard the day before. He then worked late into the night inserting charts, graphs, and eye catching animation effects. The day of the presentation, he walked into the room, imagined the audience in their underwear so he could totally relax and began to speak in an informal, extemporaneous fashion.

That was on Friday. The next Monday, their boss called the Contrary Public Speaker and said he needed public speaking training for his staff. Can you guess which manager’s performance prompted this call? It’s obvious, right?

Linda and Bob.

Both of them? Yes, both. Linda’s failure was easy to foresee but Bob did everything by the book. Why did he need help? It’s...(dramatic pause for effect) contrary to everything we’ve ever learned about public speaking.

Bob didn’t think he needed help either. In the first meeting, he was defensive and angry. He was a good speaker, he asserted.

People had been telling him that all his life. Why did he need a public speaking coach?

The Contrary Public Speaker then asked one very simple question. Was his proposal adopted? There was silence. When he gave presentations in the past, did his audience act? Did they buy his products? Implement his suggestions? Did he get the audience to do what he wanted? More silence. We then used Bob's recollections and feedback from the audience to reconstruct that afternoon and find out what went wrong.

He walked into a hot and stuffy room that Friday afternoon to find a table surrounded by grim faces. His audience, having listened to presentations all day long, was exhausted and thinking only of their weekend plans. He spent five minutes hooking his computer into the projection system while the audience fidgeted in an uncomfortable silence. Finally, Bob launched into his introduction, a long-winded joke that everybody would've been too tired to laugh at even if it had been funny. Ten minutes later, after flashing through 25 slides, the audience was falling asleep in the darkened room. Those who were still awake were struggling to read his complex tables and charts. 30 minutes later, he ended his presentation and opened it up to questions. A man who had been sitting in the corner raised his voice, "I've never liked this idea in the first place and I've heard nothing that addresses my concerns. Why should we do this?" Stymied, Bob flailed for five minutes with a response that was unorganized and unfocused as his speech. Anyone who was still paying attention at this point, even those who were initially in his corner, had now lost all confidence in him. In spite of his hours of work, enthusiasm for the assignment and adherence to everything the experts on public speaking have said, he had failed as utterly and completely as Linda. Maybe worse.

Bob did everything by the book, but the book was wrong. At least the books that he and the books that most of us read are.

So what is the right thing to do when we're asked to give a presentation? What makes a good speaker? How can we influence people, persuade our listeners to our point of view, move our audience to act?

I have spent the past fifteen years answering these questions, first for myself when I was a nationally ranked public speaker and later for my clients when I became an executive communications coach working with senior managers in our country's most exciting and innovative companies. And during those fifteen years, I've been struck by one fundamental premise that may strike you as the most contrary thing you've heard so far.

Effective public speaking is not hard.

We know what makes a good speech and a good speaker. A long time ago, thousands of years ago in fact, great thinkers and orators like Aristotle, Plato, Quintillian and Cicero figured out exactly how and why speakers succeeded. And for thousands of years, these men were the acknowledged experts. Their writings were the standard texts. Their wisdom was what anybody who wished to be an effective public speaker studied. In fact, up until the 20th Century, mastering public speaking meant mastering these classics.

But somewhere in the last 100 years or so, we stopped reading the classics, stopped learning about great rhetoric. We stopped studying the art of oration.

The funny thing is, we haven't stopped giving speeches. Public speaking is as much a part of our culture today as it was in Ancient Greece. In fact, more so. Back in Athens, you had to be rich, free, and male to speak up in public. Today, if you have a job, chances are you've had to prepare a presentation, probably lots of them. As you progress through your career, you'll have to prepare more and more of them. They've become a critical component of most jobs and today, success often hinges on a worker's "speaking skills."

This is the great irony of oratory in the present day. As public speaking and presentations becomes more and more important in the lives of more and more people, the enduring wisdom of the ancients fades farther and farther back into the mists of time. In its place, a multi-million dollar industry has developed to teach people how to speak in public with “quick and easy”, “powerful new” and “revolutionary” methods. Today, there are literally thousands of experts dedicated to developing cutting edge techniques to make us silver-tongued orators, usually in ten minutes or less.

And here’s the other great irony. This new “wisdom” has not only completely supplanted the classics, it contradicts it at virtually every turn so that compared to what we learn today, the classics appear almost heretical. Certainly they are contradictory. Once unassailable wisdom is now contrary.

Thus begins the tale of my life as the Contrary Public Speaker, though I took a roundabout way of getting there.

When I was chasing national titles in competitive public speaking, I didn’t read the classics. To be honest, I didn’t read anything. Blessed with a few natural gifts, incredibly good coaches and literally thousands and thousand of speeches worth of practice, I became one of the best speakers in the country. Later when I began to systematize my years of experience into a program that I could use with my clients, I read all the new stuff, the latest developments and the most modern methods available for communicating effectively. But I noticed something very puzzling. What I was reading didn’t fit with the techniques I knew made successful speakers. In many cases, I was being advised to do the exact opposite of what made me one of the top ranked speakers in the nation.

Convinced that most other public speaking coaches were hopelessly out of touch, I developed my own program of presentation training and successfully built a business on it. Every

once in a while, I wondered why I seemed to be the only one around who knew how to construct a good presentation, but I looked at my happy clients and shook it off. Why argue with the success I was having, even if it was lonely being a maverick?

So imagine my surprise when I finally picked up a copy of Aristotle. I wasn't alone! I wasn't very original either. Things that had taken me years of trial and error to learn had been spelled out ages ago. And Aristotle wasn't the only one. Most of the great classical writers had thought long and hard about public speaking and captured it in lectures, dialogues and books.

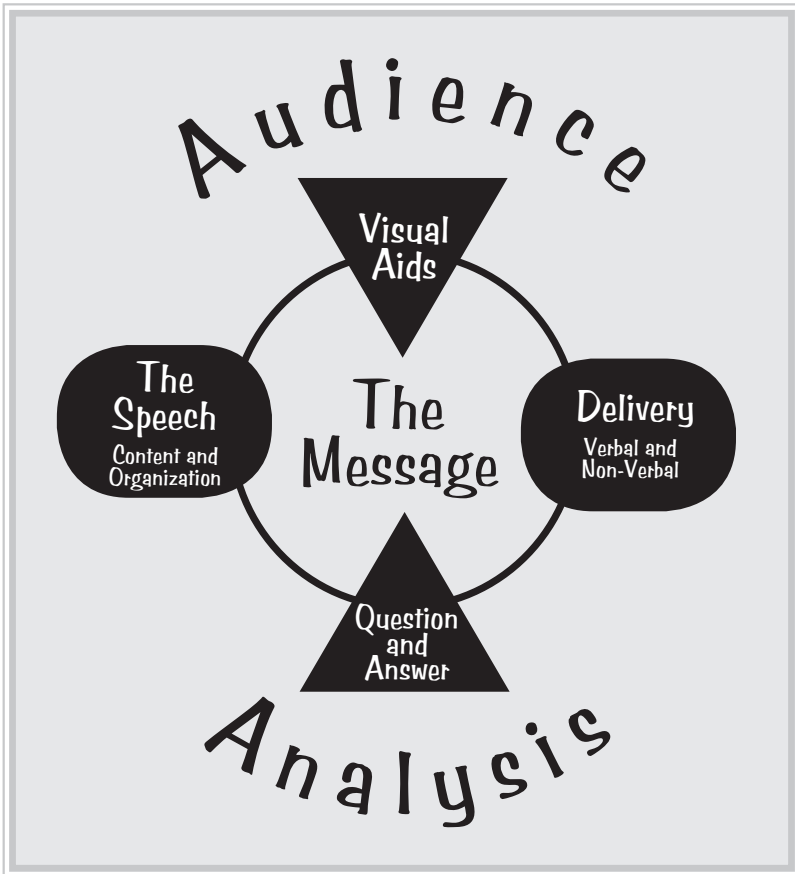
It was clear. Public speaking, good public speaking, was not about new, revolutionary, breakthrough techniques that can be learned in ten minutes or even ten days. It was and is about a clear and simple set of fundamentals that we've known all along.

### The Contrary Public Speaker's Presentation Model

The Contrary Public Speaker's Presentation Model consists of six simple elements:

- The Message
- Audience Analysis
- The Speech
- Delivery
- Visual Aid
- The Question and Answer Session.

It is a thoroughly modern and practical retooling of ancient wisdom that is all you need to master to become an effective speaker.



## The Contrary Public Speaker's Presentation Model

Ah. I hear the Greek Chorus, chiming in with questions:

**Chorus:** If the classics are so great, why don't we just read them?

**CPS:** Please do. I wish more people would. But be warned: they are dense. The only editions of Aristotle's "On Rhetoric" available are a) multi-volume sets of his complete works that don't fit well in a briefcase or b) little specialty editions printed in ancient Greek and English that are published for Classics scholars. These books are cute little things complete with hundreds of footnotes arguing arcane points of syntax, not speaking technique. They are completely out of sync with what business people need, namely simplicity and conciseness.

They are also dated, which limits their usefulness. When was the last time you had to make a formal declamation to the Senate wrapped in a toga? And the Classics don't deal with certain aspects of speaking in a modern environment. Dark and evil forces such as political correctness and PowerPoint didn't exist then. The Contrary Public Speaker endeavors to take the best of the classics, the most essential, relevant and time-tested strategies, augment it with practical, up-to-date expertise and presents it all with a clear understanding of your needs as busy professionals who require the biggest bang for the buck.

**Chorus:** Okay. So what makes you so smart?

**CPS:** As a contrary public speaker, I will start out with what I am not. I am not an actor. I am not a former broad-

cast journalist. I am not a motivational speaker. I am a nationally ranked speaker and speech writer who has spent the past 15 years teaching others to speak effectively.

I started out as a nerdy high school debater and progressed to the top ranks in collegiate competitive public speaking. I spent those years writing multiple speeches and delivering them at competitions across the nation. My judges were professors of rhetoric and special guest judges such as congressmen and corporate CEOs, even contestants' moms who were drafted into judging because another judge got sick. I learned how to appeal to every type of audience. I read hundreds of critiques of my own performances and wrote hundreds more when I became a judge myself. For the past ten years, I've been teaching university courses and privately coaching executives and senior managers in public speaking, preparing them for presentations, board meetings, road shows and media appearances.

I know what makes an effective speech and how to make an effective speaker. I've been doing it all my life.

**Chorus:** Fine. But what's so contrary about you? Is what's being taught now really that different from your approach??

**CPS:** Yes! This isn't one of those "Forget everything you've ever learned about..." books but it is a "Forget most of it" book. Here are some examples of conventional wisdom that you will NOT see in this book:

- The best way to begin a speech is with a joke.

- Use lots of visual aids.
- Silence is bad. Avoid “dead air.”
- Don’t read from a script. Speak extemporaneously.
- You can cure stage fright.
- Public speaking is all about delivery.
- This book will make you a charismatic speaker.

**Chorus:** Whoa! Back up there. Why read this book if it’s not going to make us great speakers?

**CPS:** I knew you’d catch me on that one, but I have to say it. If I’ve learned one thing in my years of coaching, it’s that truly charismatic speakers are born, not made. Cicero agreed with me on this one. Charisma, that inef-fable quality that characterizes the truly extraordinary speakers of history, cannot be taught. It may be lurking deep inside you waiting to burst forth, or you may develop it as you give more and more presentations, but it’s not something that this book or any book, seminar, or coaching session can generate on its own. If you don’t come in here with a certain innate magnetism, I can’t you make you Martin Luther King, Jr. or Bob Costas or Ronald Reagan.

But that’s okay, because you don’t need to be a bundle of charisma to be an effective public speaker. In fact, people who are considered by many to be “great speakers” are often not effective speakers. They are fluid, funny, and dynamic, but they often rely on that innate charm rather than investing the time necessary to develop a presentation that will make the audience act. If your audience is entertained and amused by your pre-

sentation, more power to you. But an effective speaker is one who successfully persuades the audience to act and accomplishes his or her goals.

That is the goal of this book.

There's a scene in the movie "All that Jazz" where Bob Fosse is working with a dancer who got a job in the chorus line because she..., well, let's say she didn't get it on talent and ability. In this scene, Fosse's demanding rehearsal style has driven her to the point of quitting. He takes her into the corner to talk to her:

*"Listen. I can't make you a great dancer. I don't even know if I can make you a good dancer. But, if you keep trying and don't quit, I know I can make you a better dancer. I'd like very much to do that. Stay?"*

Substitute "speaker" for "dancer" and you have my purpose in life. I know I can make you a better speaker and I'd very much like to do that. Stay?

## Back to the Classics - Act II

Good, you're still here.

Now we can answer the one question that everyone asks at this point:

If public speaking is so easy, why is it so hard?

There are three big reasons why there aren't more good speakers and good presentations out there:

1. People aren't taught how to prepare and give a good presentation any more;

2. People who take the initiative to go out and learn are often taught the wrong thing because;
3. Most people don't want to hear the right thing, which is: an effective presentation requires an investment in time and thought. As I've said, no seminar or book, even this one, will make you a better speaker on it's own. You must first learn the essentials and then commit yourself to the time and energy it takes to become an effective speaker.

After that, it is easy.

There's another reason why public speaking is hard, but it has nothing to do with the speaker. It has to do with the audience. A presentation is, in many ways, the worst way to convey information to people. Why?

1. Audiences are mentally lazy. Even if they are interested in the topic, their attention tends to wander. What's for lunch? How much work is piled up on my desk? What's that green stuff between his teeth?
2. They have incredibly short attention spans and they're getting shorter. Audiences don't have the focus to pay attention to complex ideas and analysis any more. Blame who you like, TV ads, MTV's editing style, or video games, today's audiences don't have the patience to listen like they used to.
3. And here's the dirty little secret about public speaking, especially in business. Most people actually dislike listening to presentations. They would rather be almost anywhere else than cooped up in a room listening to you. Think about it. When was the last time you looked

forward to listening to a presentation?

And unlike the written word, your audience can't go back and re-read the last sentence of the paragraph that they missed because their thoughts wandered, if they miss anything during your presentation, there is no "re-wind" button. They've missed it for good.

But in spite of all these obstacles, presentations are still one of the most important elements of success in business today. They are how your ideas get exposed and how you get exposure. You'll never advance if you can't persuade. It is critical to your success in business that you be an effective speaker.

This book is the first step. It is written expressly for business professionals at every level who make presentations and speeches to audiences large and small. But don't put this book down if you aren't a business professional! Not-for-profit managers, government workers, students, clergy, in fact, anyone who has to speak publicly (and that includes virtually everyone) should know that the fundamentals you will read in this book are universal. What makes an effective speech in business is the same as what makes an effective speech anywhere.

In the next 100 pages you'll learn the essential elements of the Contrary Public Speaker's simple six-step process that you can use for every speech you will ever make in your lifetime. The book is organized in the same order that you will follow to prepare yourself for your presentation:

- How to develop a clear, focused, and compelling core message.
- How to understand your audience and get the information you need.
- How to organize and write a speech that ensures your audience understands your message and is compelled

to act.

- How to deliver your speech with maximum impact, deal with stage fright and convey passion and credibility.
- How to create and use (and not use) visual aids that enhance you as the speaker.
- How to survive and thrive during the question-and-answer period.

Here's the best news of all: After you've read this book, you'll know more about public speaking than 99% of the population. And the great thing about public speaking being hard is that those who do it well are treated with reverence and awe.

You are going to be one of those people.