

It's About Time

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Waiting and watching the clock. We have all done that at various times throughout our lives, and for various reasons. I remember graduate school seminars, as a speech communication major, spending a lot of time doing just that. In the field of speech, students (and, in particular, those in grad-level courses) are expected to do a lot of, well, speeches; virtually every research project means making a presentation to the respective class, outlining the study and results. In the program I was in, such presentations were expected to take between 20 and 30 minutes and each graduate seminar had about 10 students (for three-hour classes, once a week, it meant that half would present one week and the other half, the next). My last name begins with "H," meaning that I almost inevitably would be the last one scheduled for the first night of presentations. Assuming everything went on schedule.

"Chronemics" is the technical term for the use (and misuse) of time. How we handle time, especially in our relationships with others, communicates a great deal, positively and negatively.[1] I vividly remember watching and listening to the students presenting before me (last names beginning with the letters A through G) and sharing their amazing experiences that were, at least to them, more important than anyone or anything else at that point in time. Speaker one would take the most liberty and usually go about 15 minutes overtime. The next speakers, seeing that as "permission" to wax poetic for as long as desired, would follow suit. Of course, the professor, not wanting to let any pearl of wisdom become stifled, would allow the monologues to go on almost as long as a presenter desired while I, number five on the schedule (which was clearly no longer a viable element of the class) realized that I would either be limited to 15 minutes, at best, or postponed to the next week's class (and this, after preparing all my notes, handouts, and nerves accordingly). Again.

When I began teaching public speaking on the college level, I made up my mind that one thing would be adhered to against all else: time limits. After all, evaluating (grading) a speech is very much a subjective art. I learned early in my education that my choice of subject should be one my teacher liked (this increased the chances of him/her listening to me and thereby issuing a good grade). If a teacher did not like the topic, then there was a good chance anything said would not be heard and the grade would suffer. The various elements such as eye contact, gestures, use of visual aids, voice inflection, and even volume depend on what the professor feels is "right." (Some instructors love gestures and vocal excitement while others prefer a student be less an actor and more a serious orator; a hard-of-hearing teacher may perceive a student as mumbling while another instructor with exceptional hearing may assess the volume as perfect.)

The one element of a speech assignment that is purely objective is timing: it is either within the time limit or it is not. I made that clear to my students: everyone had to have a chance to speak and I would literally stop a speech if it went more than two minutes overtime (students were given time signals and speeches ranged, by assignment, from three to eight minutes in length). Everyone who was scheduled to speak on a given day would have a chance to speak (barring unforeseen circumstances such as earthquakes, fire drills, or physical inability of the speaker). I never wanted my students to experience what I did (and, with the exception of the one time, in thirteen years of college teaching, when *I* was too sick to attend class—and I called each

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[1] Ernest G. & Nancy C. Bormann. *Effective Group Communication, 5th ed.* Edina, MN: Burgess International Group, Inc., 1992, p. 57.

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student scheduled to speak to tell him/her personally —no one in my classes ever did).

What does that experience have to do with genealogy speakers? How often have you attended a presentation that was scheduled for one hour but ended up with the speaker droning on for an extra 10, 15, even 20 minutes (or longer) with no sign of letting up? Let's face it, most of the audience, planning to listen for only 60 minutes, will discontinue their listening behavior at exactly that point, meaning that the remaining information, imparted in the extra minutes, likely is not even absorbed by the listeners.[2] Since we know that the audience members will probably tune out some of those important "final thoughts," why, then, do we keep speaking? There are a number of reasons, but even more compelling ones for us to stop talking before our audience stops listening.

I have prepared the most amazing material and I know everyone in the audience will benefit from it. It is important. It will make the difference between finding ancestors and continuing to hit heads against proverbial brick walls. That is one reason that speakers proceed, even though they have been told what the time restrictions are. So let us look at what time restrictions mean and why they are imposed.

One club president told me once that he knows his society members and their ability/willingness to listen to a speaker. He was very clear: 45 minutes of speaking with about 10 minutes for questions was all they could handle (it would have been nice if he had told me that sometime *before* I arrived to give my presentation). I told him that I would watch carefully and, sure enough, at the 45-minute point, I saw people beginning to get that glazed-over look in their eyes. I was about 10 minutes from the end of my presentation, but decided no one would know that there was more if I declared that the point I was then discussing was my last, summarized my main ideas, and asked for questions. No one did know. The president of the society was thrilled and commented that I ended at just the right time. I took the compliment, collected my pay, and made a tentative booking for the next year.

Chronemics: it says a lot! How we choose to use time (ours and others) says: "you matter to me," "I care about our relationship," and "your time is valuable." Or the contrary: "I am the most important," "your life/time is irrelevant," and "your society's obligations are of no concern to me." Because our use of time (particularly as it relates to others) can be interpreted in these ways, it can have important effects on our lives and professions as speakers.[3] The person who speaks overtime, especially when the time limit was clearly defined by the program chair, may find him/herself not getting booked for that group again. And there is a chance that the program chair from that society will tell others in other societies about the rude speaker who went overtime, in spite of being advised of the constraints. Who knows how many bookings can be lost by one presentation exceeding the time limit?

There are any number of reasons for such restrictions besides those of the aforementioned society where the listening stamina was limited. Sometimes a venue (library, civic center, or other meeting location) has a required closing time. In some cases, the society pays for the use of the meeting hall and has to pay additional fees (to cover a cleanup crew staying late or overtime use of utilities), making it a budget matter. Or the meeting location may be reserved for the next time period by another group, so a long-running speaker in the earlier meeting may result in the next group getting a late start. In some cases, society members may have transportation issues (carpooling, public transportation, etc.) that are complicated when a meeting runs long. In short, a meeting that runs over the scheduled time may create any number of

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[2] Andrew D. Wolvin, Roy M. Berko, & Darlyn R. Wolvin. *The Public Speaker/The Public Listener.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993, p. 91.

[3] Ronald B. Adler, Lawrence B. Rosenfeld, Neil Towne, & Russell F. Proctor, III. *Interplay: The Process of Interpersonal Communication, 7th ed.* Ft. Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998, pp. 193-194.

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problems.[4] In any of these situations, the speaker is likely not going to be informed of the "behind the scenes" problems that arise when he/she extends the presentation beyond the agreed-upon time limit.

So what's a speaker to do? You do not want to leave the audience "hanging" or missing material. Here are a few suggestions to help make you a more time-friendly speaker.

1 C**ommunicate**! Ask the program chair (or whoever books you) to explain the timing expectations (just as a 90-minute presentation does not fit into a 60-minute time slot, neither is a club pleased when an expected 90-minute presentation ends in less than an hour—they perceive that they did not get their money's worth). If the presentation is to be one hour, including the question/answer period, and the requested program is one hour, without time for questions, tell the program chair. Perhaps there is some leeway. Or perhaps you can edit a part out (yes, that cute story about Grandma at the zoo may have to be omitted). Or perhaps you can suggest a different presentation. But all of these possibilities should be explored before you walk into the meeting with laptop and projector in tow!

2 **Be responsible for your own timing**. Most of us approach a new venue with no idea what we will find. Will there be a wall clock visible from the front of the room? Is there a timing device provided on the lectern? Is someone in the society assigned to give you a time signal? Or is it none of the above? I bring my cell phone, switched to "airplane mode" (all features are operable except for the receiving and sending of calls), and click it to "stopwatch." On my phone, that feature keeps the light on and the phone sits next to my laptop or on the lectern without being a distraction. Prior to cell phones, I carried a stopwatch, but a simple watch of any type will work; just be sure to note the time you started (or, in the case of a stopwatch, click the "start" function).

3 **Use "zippers."** Sometimes a presentation times out differently at home than it does in front of an audience. If you are giving a program for a first time or if audience behavior may alter your timing, zipper elements can be your saving grace. These are stories or examples that can be inserted or omitted (zipped in or out) as needed and are even possible in PowerPoint presentations. Make a note of where you perceive your half-way point to be (put this indication in your notes or insert an unobtrusive icon at the corner of your half-way slide). If you arrive at that spot after your physical half-way point has passed (according to the clock or your stopwatch), eliminate a story (or two) from the second half of your presentation (bye-bye Grandma at the zoo). If you have *not* reached the half-way point when the clock says you should have, have a story in reserve to zip in at a previously determined place in the program. This requires preparation: you must have stories or examples in the second half of the program that can be omitted or added without it being obvious to the audience and without negatively affecting the content of your presentation. These should not be slide-dependent (it is distracting, even though sometimes necessary, when the speaker races through three or four slides with the statement "we don't have time for these"). Do not let the audience know they are missing out on any part of your presentation.

4 **Establish "rules."** If you believe your talk might be close to the time limit, tell the audience that they need to hold questions until the end. Many people do not like to wait, but frequently the questions are answered elsewhere in the program if the audience member will just be patient. Once you break the rule, however, all bets are off and even the most carefully timed program is suddenly out of control, as far as chronemics are concerned. Should someone wish to ask a question, request that

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[4] John K. Brilhart, Gloria J. Galanes, & Katherine Adams. *Effective Group Discussion: Theory and Practice, 10th ed.* Boston: McGraw Hill, 2001, p. 221.

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he/she make note of it and you will get to it as soon as you are through. Be assertive; as long as you are at the lectern, you are the one in charge!

While none of these suggestions provides a fool-proof method of keeping the timing under control, some of them might help you to avoid the pitfalls of presenting a poorly timed program. And everything about timing becomes even more an issue when you are presenting at a seminar or conference. Frequently in such circumstances, you, as one of many speakers, are followed by another presenter and presentation, requiring you to rapidly vacate the area, packing up equipment while continuing to answer questions (or listen to the experiences) of audience members who were inspired by the just-completed talk. The incoming speaker will be annoyed if you delay in your room exit. If you have timed your program well, this will be less an issue as you can actually begin to dismantle equipment (if necessary) while proceeding with the question/answer portion of your presentation.

So consider this: careful timing of a genealogy presentation can provide a number of benefits. A well-timed presentation means that the speaker has one less element of his/her program about which to experience stress. A well-timed presentation means that the booking society has one less element of the meeting about which to be concerned. A speaker who has an understanding of the timing issue of his/her program will be more likely to be perceived as considerate and well-prepared, hence a good choice as a future presenter and one to recommend to other societies. Speakers who follow presenters who are conscientious about timing are likely to be pleased and may become valuable allies in your speaking business. And, while the audience may not get to hear about Grandma and her experience at the zoo, perhaps you can share that story when the society president invites you out for coffee after the meeting.

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