How to Work with Students on Oral Presentations

Clarity of Argument
• Remember, an argument is the same in oral and written works, so treat it like you would a written assignment
• Help the student go from written to oral
• Ask them how they might signpost or constantly resummarize their argument to help the audience follow it
• Have them practice and pay attention to how easy/difficult it is to follow the reasoning

Nonverbal Communication
• Teach the student how to improve nonverbal communication outside of the Writing Center through recording and reviewing additional practice runs.
• Being conscious of flaws in nonverbal communication is the first step towards correction. It's okay to point out if the student is leaning against the wall while talking or keeping both hands hidden from view.
• Does the student block the presentation when referring to something?
• Is the student staring into space while talking or making inappropriate eye contact? It's tough to check for this during a consultation so have the student make and break contact with imaginary members of the audience.

Clarity of Speech
• Be aware of the pacing of their speech. Most likely the student is speaking too quickly out of nervousness, so you can help them by slowing the pacing down to a clear level.
• Be aware of any speech patterns that hinder clarity. Do they speak with a catch in their throat? Do they click their teeth in between sentences? Do they radically change their tone or pacing throughout the presentation? Like helping with flow in a written paper, you can help be the second pair of eyes that lets them catch these issues.
• Let them practice. Be a sympathetic audience and have them go over their presentation as if they were actually delivering it. This will help them get over nerves and become more comfortable with the actual words they will be using.
• As a catch-all advice: Speak slowly, calmly, and confidently. This will help the student convey authority and avoid making speech errors.
Script vs. Notecards vs. Memorization

• Make sure to figure out the students’ specific needs:
  • Do they get particularly nervous? (Try having them write out exactly what they want to say, in a script. This won't be something they should memorize, but rather something that helps them make sense of their ideas/topic as having an underlying structure.)
  • Is this a technical presentation? (Encourage them to write technical terms on notecards as not to stumble over them.)
  • Do they need to engage their audience in discussion throughout? (Then scripts/notecards/memorization aren't as handy. Rather, make sure they practice with you as the mock audience.) etc.
  • Help the student figure out the main points they want to communicate. These are the points that should be memorized or put on notecards.
  • Make sure the student knows how their points connect. If they forget the order of things, perhaps come up with key phrases that, when delivered, can serve as cues for what comes next.

Improvisation

• Students will often forget what they are saying
  • Remind them that this happens and work with them on ways to recover
  • Ask them to describe the information to you multiple different ways to get them away from exact wording and comfortable with the concepts behind the words
  • While they practice presenting, ask questions or create disruptions to throw them off
  • Remind them that an oral presentation is just talking about a topic, which they know how to do
  • Talk about how they might change their notecards/aids in light of this improv exercise

Visual Aids

• Ask the student to practice their presentation in front you while using the PowerPoint/poster/whatever visual aid they brought
  • Ensure that the student is only using visual aids that augment the content of their presentation: nothing too superfluous or cheesy!
  • Consider pointing out places where the student is relying too heavily on the visuals, e.g. by reading the text verbatim or looking at the screen instead of at the audience