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## Articles on:

- Communication, including listening and presentation skills
- Relationships, including managing stress
- Writing, including journaling and scrapbooking

## Additional writing credits:

- Four non-fiction books, most recently *Business Writing for Results* [McGraw Hill]
- The Josie Prescott Antiques Mysteries [St. Martin's Minotaur]

PERSONAL

## How to handle questions with poise and confidence

BY JANE K. CLELAND

**Q**uick! How much did your association spend on telecommunications last year? When is the proposal going to be completed? Are you certain your numbers are right? They don't look right.

Don't panic. Easy-to-remember strategies will have you handling questions like a pro — even when you don't know the answers. If you get butterflies when faced with speaking in public, you're likely to perceive any unexpected question as confrontational. Even if you're a comfortable public speaker, some questions can be intimidating. ▶ 14



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## ■ Intelligence



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Learning tried-and-true techniques boosts confidence, and many people find that their newfound poise helps them overcome much of the anxiety associated with public speaking in general.

### VIEWING QUESTIONS AS COMPLIMENTS

Start by acknowledging that anyone asking you a question is giving you a compliment. A question means the person is listening to you. Therefore, always honor the questioner. Nod, thank the person, listen carefully, smile — do whatever you can to help him or her feel comfortable.

Next, determine if you know the

answer. If you do, give a short reply and say, “I’ll be covering XYZ in more detail after lunch” or “Does that clarify the issue?” If you don’t know the answer, ask yourself why you don’t know. If there’s no reason for you to know, you could say, “Our member renewal figures are available by the 15th of each month. I’ll call you as soon as they’re out” or “We’ve never considered coordinating our schedules with the school system. It’s an intriguing idea. May I call you tomorrow to discuss it?”

If you don’t know the answer but think that you should know, ask yourself why you don’t. If it’s an oversight, you could say, “You’re right. I should include the numbers from the golf outing. I’ll

call my assistant at the next break to get the data.” Note that you’re not apologizing or offering excuses; you’re telling the truth and solving the problem.

### DEALING WITH SARCASM AND HOSTILITY

If someone is sarcastic or hostile, ignore the sarcasm or hostility and deal with the content of the question. It’s important to note that one person’s sarcasm or hostility does not reflect the group’s feeling. The individual might be having a bad day, or perhaps he or she is simply a mean person. Don’t take it personally. By addressing the content part of the question, you’re taking the high road.

Remember that groups don’t like nasty people; due to self-interest, the group wants you to succeed. Furthermore, if you’re mean or hostile in response, you force the audience to choose sides: mean versus mean. If you maintain calm dignity, avoid the emotion, and deal with the content, you allow the audience to

choose between mean and gracious.

If the question is inappropriate, off the subject, or otherwise likely to distract you or the group from the subject at hand, say, “I’ll be glad to discuss it with you privately at the next break,” and immediately resume your presentation.

The ability to field questions well is a hallmark of an excellent presenter. Three keys to success include knowing your material well, practicing answering hard questions, and developing a set response for situations in which you don’t know the answer.

And smile. Smiling is contagious. Make your audience feel welcome and comfortable, and no question will be too tough to handle.

**AUTHOR LINK** Jane Cleland is the author of three books including *Putting First What Matters Most*.

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Be specific, honest and direct.

# Putting First What Matters Most

Putting first what matters most is almost always a smart idea. It's tempting to organize a presentation by laying the groundwork first, leading up to your key points, and concluding with what you think will clinch your argument. The problem is that this approach will work well only if your audience is truly interested in your message.

Most often your audience doesn't come into the situation ready to listen. Usually people depend on your first words to hook their interest; if you don't capture their attention, you've lost them. Think of this strategy as putting the "bottom line on top."

Consider whether the following opening lines are likely to pique an audience's interest:

- "Last quarter's expense figures were 8 percent higher than expected, and this quarter's numbers also look bad."
- "We've just received word that the project has been approved."
- "I've quoted my mother 16 times in the last month. That's a lot of times to quote someone, and a tribute to her wit, intellect and love of language."
- "It's a privilege to be here, and I thank you for inviting me."
- "When you're strong physically, you have the confidence to compete intellectually and emotionally. You won't be pushed around, and your grades will go up."

Two factors are central to the above five examples – the situation and the audience. Respectively they were:

- A department vice president summarizing the quarter's results to the executive committee.
- A team leader announcing to the team that a client has approved a new initiative.

- A grieving child eulogizing his or her mother to family and friends.
- An author accepting a fan club's award at its annual banquet.
- The owner of a karate school explaining the benefits of learning self-defense to junior high school students who signed up for a free lesson.

Note what these examples have in common:

- Despite disparate audiences and objectives, all presenters stated their positions right away. Within the first two sentences each presenter put first what matters most.
- The word "I" is rarely used. Instead, the focus is on the audience; each presenter defined what matters most from the audience's point of view – not his or her own.
- All statements are truthful. When you put first what matters most, you can't fake it.
- All statements are unequivocal. Each presenter formed an opinion or stated facts without qualification – once the speaker determined what mattered enough to put first, he or she was willing to stand by his convictions.
- Not one of the speakers used humor. Unless you're a comedian, what matters most is unlikely to be funny.
- You can't go wrong when you tell the truth in a concise manner, when you focus on your audience's point of view, and when you put first what matters most. Speaking within this structure, of course, requires that either you know what matters most, or that you're able to do the research necessary to discern it.

It sounds self-evident, but it's not: In order to put first what matters most you need to know what matters

most. Determining what matters most requires that you know a fair amount about your specific audience. People are different – what matters to one group might not matter to another.

Consider these five examples targeting different audiences:

**1** Instead of targeting the executive committee, let's say that the department vice president is trying to inspire his or her city's Chamber of Commerce to support legislation offering tax advantages to businesses moving into the community:

*"We've got to work together to bring in new business. My business has been bad – how about yours? Are sales down? Are expenses up? Does the future look bright?"*

**2** Instead of telling the team the good news, the team leader is explaining to her child's soccer team why she can't go to the next game.

*"You guys are going to have such a good time! With your talent and drive, you're going to do great. And I want you to remember every single minute of the game because I want to hear all about it – OK?"*

**3** Instead of delivering a eulogy to a group of loving relatives and friends, the survivor is speaking to his or her church Bible study group.

*"You never knew my mother, so you never enjoyed her wit, observed her smarts, or witnessed her clever use of words. She was brilliant, my mother, and I wish you could have known*

*her. When I think of her astute observations, I'm reminded of...."*

**4** Instead of addressing a fan club, the author is pitching an ad agency:

*"You know how most of your clients want to reach kids – well, guess what? I know that audience. They gave me an award."*

**5** Instead of targeting junior high school students, the karate teacher is targeting their parents.

*"If you're like me, I worry whether my kids will fit in. Don't you want them to be able to hold their own?"*

Note that in each case the "bottom-line point" changed to accommodate different audiences. There's no right or wrong – but there are differences. In order to succeed in presenting, you need to put first what matters most to your specific target audience. How do you know what to put first? Ask them. Analyze your listeners. Research their needs.

Once you know what your audience needs or wants to know, tell them. Tell them what they want to know specifically, honestly and directly – when you start your presentation with what matters most to them, your presentation will succeed. **1**

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## Thinking Backwards

Imagining what your article looks like *after* it's designed can make your writing better.

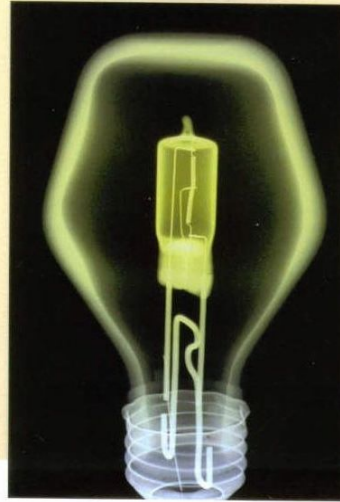
It's COUNTER-INTUITIVE, but sometimes the quickest way to write killer copy is to slow down and give some thought to how it will look in a magazine layout. Before you put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, ask yourself what components your editor needs you to fill and how to satisfy the publication's overall look and feel.

Most professional writers spend a fair amount of time thinking about the points they want to make; the examples that will resonate with their editors and readers; and the facts, quotes, references and other forms of proof they want to integrate into the content. But what many freelance and even some staff writers don't think about much (or at all) is how savvy writing can be improve the design.

Doing so can facilitate reader acceptance and understanding. For example, Linda Landigran, editor-in-chief of *Alfred*

*Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, says that before writing her editor's letter, she first considers the issue's theme, how all the stories link together. From this assessment, she determines whether she'll create a light and airy bulleted list of key points or whether the theme is more appropriately written as denser narrative. "Readers get visual clues that help draw them in to the content," she says.

Other times, writing to a specific design is an essential part of branding. "Readers buy our materials because they're easy to read and easy to understand. Our design and format support that accessibility," explains Paula Munier, director of product development for Adams Media. "We buy writing based on a design blueprint. We like sidebars, illustrations, charts and bulleted lists, so we require writers to organize their content to suit those design imperatives."



FPO MAGAZINE • PREMIER ISSUE

If you want to experiment with this approach, it can be helpful to ask yourself these questions:

**What mood does the layout convey?**

Or, what mood does your editor want? Does he want the layout to appear:

**Serious and conservative?** Write longer sentences and paragraphs and use fewer illustrations and other graphic devices.

**Friendly and playful?** Write shorter sentences and integrate more graphics.

**Newsy?** Use kickers and select content-rich photographs that lend themselves to captions that explain why the photograph was chosen, not merely what it shows.

**Educational?** Add sidebars packed with how-to instructions, tips, shortcuts and the like.

**How committed are the publication's readers?** Are they:

**Devoted?** Provide loads of details without worrying about the denseness or complexity of the text.

- ▶ **Scanners?** Integrate white space to allow for easy starts and stops.
- ▶ **Seeking out something specific?** Clearly differentiate units of content.

The benefits of using this strategy stretch beyond the speed and efficiency of writing; you'll help designers bring your words to life. Certainly, the editor and you, as the author, are in the best position to know which points should be highlighted. By thinking of the layout from a design perspective, you help the designer showcase your words. Further, communicating your suggestions positions you as an ally, not an adversary. You'll be viewed as a team player and as someone who's easy to work with if you go the extra mile and suggest which parts of the content will:

- ▶ likely hook readers' interest (pull quotes/blurbs).
- ▶ serve as a "take-away" listing (sidebars, inserts).
- ▶ add secondary and/or tertiary benefits (kickers/subheadings).

- ▶ segregate units of content that may be of interest to some (but not all) of your readers, such as technical specs, a success story and the like (text boxes).
- ▶ work well in promotional or editorial contexts (abstracts used to flesh out tables of content, editorial letters or notes, decks).

VISUALIZING THE DESIGN before you write can be a shortcut to producing on-the-mark writing as well as facilitating a harmonious design. The bottom line: Don't write in a vacuum; instead, picture the layout from the reader's perspective, then use that image to clarify and structure your content and communicate your ideas to the designer. **FPO**

**JANE K. CLELAND** is the author of business communications books, including *How to Create High Impact Design and Business Writing for Results*. She also authors the Josie Prescott Antiques Mystery novels. *Antiques to Die For*, the third in the St. Martin's Minotaur series, will be published in April 2008.