Oral Interpretation

You’ve written a terrific piece of poetry, prose, or a non-fiction essay. Now you want to read that piece in such a way that the audience gets a true feel for the meaning of the piece. There are a few things to keep in mind when preparing for this kind of presentation.

**Limit the material**

You need to know how much time you have to complete the reading and edit your writing down to meet the time limit. This can be hard work because you feel that all of your writing is worthwhile, but you will have a stronger presentation if you limit yourself to the minimum time limit. Try to find the most important part and the section of the writing that might resonate with that particular audience. You might also make sure that you choose a section that you are comfortable reading. Minimize minute details. An acronym to keep in mind is K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple Silly).

**Know the material**

The first step to preparing for the reading is to know the material. Read over the piece multiple times before editing it down. When writing your manuscript, don’t write down every word you’re going to say in order to keep it conversational and prevent you from reading straight from the paper. Once you have edited down the content and are sure that you meet the time limits, read over the piece several more times. It’s best to almost memorize the material so that when you look up at your audience, you are able to find your place again when you look back at your manuscript.

**Think about the meaning of the words**

Go through each sentence and think about what message you are trying to convey. Underline the key word(s) in each sentence and think about ways to emphasize the word(s) when reading the passage. Also think about how the word(s) relate to the overall presentation.

**Make sure the manuscript is readable**

Double space the manuscript and use font size 14 so that you can easily read the material. Include page numbers so that you can quickly get your pages back in order if you drop them or accidentally mix up or skip pages.

**Mark up your manuscript**

Add notations—“slow down”, “breathe”, “pause”, “look up”, underline key words, etc.—to give yourself reminders about delivery. You can even include notations about timing, indicating where you should be at each minute marker.
Make sure that the delivery is believable

Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that we need to take on a different speaking style when we are reading to an audience. This is not true. It’s more important that your reading is believable to the audience and that you are comfortable with the style you have chosen. Subtle voice changes are sometimes more effective for this type of presentation.

Think about the basics of delivery

Make sure that you can be heard by everyone in the audience, that you are speaking slowly enough that the audience can follow you (but not too slowly), that you enunciate, that you have quality eye contact with your audience, and that your gestures add to the reading (don’t distract). Be sure to avoid jargon so the audience can grasp the concept you are presenting.

- Think about increasing your energy level when speaking—this will boost your volume, make you appear to be more confident, and hold your audience’s interest for a longer period of time.
- Memorize the first few words of a new page so you don’t need to pause when transitioning to a new page.
- Try to make the page transition as subtle as possible.
- Use the fingertips of one hand to mark your place on the manuscript. This allows you to have better eye contact without losing your place.
- If a visual aid is used (i.e. PowerPoint) keep it to a minimum to avoid it becoming a distraction. You want your audience paying attention to you, not reading your slides. A general rule for slides is that 1 slide equals about 2-3 minutes of speaking time.

Contrast is important

Think about varying your volume, rate, tone, and gestures at different points of the reading. Avoid monotone delivery. Also be sure to move around and not stand in one spot.

Practice, practice, practice

Start by working on your own, timing yourself each time that you read. Next, recruit an audience—friends, family, or peer-tutors—to listen to the reading. Make sure that they are willing to give you valuable feedback. Finally, record yourself. Use a tape recorder, or (better yet) a camcorder to see how you sound/look. If you don’t have access to a camcorder, practice in a mirror. If discussion questions are a portion of your presentation, think of potential questions the audience may ask you so you can be prepared to answer them. If you don’t know the answer, it’s okay to say you don’t know and that you may need to look it up and get back to them.

Nervous?

Make sure that you are thoroughly prepared (that makes a huge difference with speech anxiety), have practiced several times, have used the Speaking and Writing Center, and have taken advice from the Speaking Center handout on speech anxiety. Perhaps have a friend in the audience give you a thumbs up and a smile to help you relax.