Introductions: Necessary Formality or Poetic Prelude?
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ABSTRACT
Whether we are introducing a program, a speaker, or an issue, our purpose is to convey information, spark interest, and create an attitude, preferably a positive one. Many of us tackle the challenge of introductions lightly, exerting no more time and energy than minimally necessary. Is this lack of preparation detrimental to our purpose? This article suggests that introductions can significantly affect the success of a gathering. Specific ways to enrich an introduction are presented.

Do you care to count the number of introductions you’ve heard? Do you remember any of them? How about the times when others have introduced you? Do any of these beginnings stand out in your mind as memorable?

All too often the introductions heard at meetings, conferences, or other gatherings effect a neutral reaction in us. Despite hearing a recitation of credentials earned, positions held, and awards received, we are often left knowing little more about the speaker than the fact that he or she is present and ready to begin. Are introductions a mere formality or can they contribute to the success of the occasion at hand?

Most of us believe that we do, indeed, know how to introduce a speaker and that we are able to do so effectively. Why then is so little of what we say remembered by those who hear us? There are specific ways to enrich our introductions and their delivery that will pique the interest of the audience and add enjoyment to the whole experience.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTRODUCTION
In his book, Winning When It Really Counts, Arch Lustberg (1988a) emphasizes that the shorter an introduction is, the better it is, provided two conditions are met. He notes that the first purpose of an introduction is to awaken in the audience an eagerness to hear the speaker. The participants will be interested to know why this particular individual was chosen and how he or she is qualified to address the topic. When the listeners realize the excellent choice of presenter, their decision to attend this program will be positively reinforced. They are pleased to have made the intelligent choice to come to the meeting. Already you will have created an optimistic mindset for the program to follow.

Lustberg’s (1988a) second objective for an introduction is focused on the speaker’s ego. After relating the individual’s specific expertise, you’ll want to add some comments to make him or her feel proud to have been selected to speak at your meeting. A speaker who feels both valued and valuable will radiate a glow of affirmation that will permeate delivery of the message. Before the presenter has even opened his or her mouth to say one word, your introduction has set the stage and initiated an aura of anticipatory excitement in both the audience and the speaker. What better way is there to begin a presentation?

Have you ever personally experienced an audience that seems “turned on” to you? They listen attentively, respond enthusiastically, and display facial expressions reflecting interest and engagement. Each feeds into the other’s energy, giving rise to a spirited exchange. I have often wondered what causes this extraordinary marriage between speaker ambience and audience receptivity. Perhaps it is mere coincidence, or it could be that an introduction has kindled a readiness and acceptance between the two.

DEVELOPING THE INTRODUCTION
Having established Lustberg’s (1988a) two qualifications as components of an effective introduction, the challenge then comes in deciding what specific infor-
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Information to include while maintaining brevity. After each of us has had the opportunity to make about three introductions on separate occasions, it probably becomes clear that spontaneity in public speaking works well for a very small and select group of people. We begin to understand that it is essential to prepare what we are going to say. Time must be taken to gather our thoughts and commit them to paper. It is in the writing of our comments that we open up the opportunity to eliminate words that may cause inflammatory responses, to provide structure and cohesion, and to access a level of confidence that accompanies preparedness.

A place to begin is by reviewing the speaker’s résumé or curriculum vitae. You’ll want to request this document several days or even one or two weeks beforehand, to assure yourself enough time to study it and extract pertinent data. I have witnessed some of the most influential and powerful leaders offer introductions that consist of simply reading off educational and experiential accomplishments from the curriculum vitae. Statistics are very difficult to process by hearing alone. Most audiences find a recitation like this boring and meaningless. Facts all by themselves are insufficient, as they fail to excite or even arouse curiosity. Your goal is to select only those items from the curriculum vitae that support the speaker’s expertise on a particular topic and for a particular audience.

For example, in preparing an introduction for a physician who will address the topic of perinatal depression before an audience of public health nurses, the physician’s dual residency in obstetrics and psychiatry is noteworthy, as well as her membership on the state’s task force for developing perinatal care guidelines. These discriminating particulars communicate the fact that this physician not only has the background knowledge to cover the topic thoroughly, but also cares enough about the issues affecting public health nurses to assist in government policy development. In choosing relevant material, a useful rule of thumb is to put yourself in the audience and consider what information you would like to have about the presenter. One’s own point of view is usually a fairly accurate barometer of the audience’s preferences.

Once the significant details are extracted from the curriculum vitae, these data should be infused with life and motion (Wohlmut, 1983). Translating facts into real outcomes spawns interest; molding experiences to evoke emotion generates eagerness; and interpreting information so that it is personally meaningful for your audience focuses their attention.

Consider these two phrases: “She is frequently asked to speak on this topic to national audiences,” or “She has stirred the consciousness of human beings.” Which of these two statements, both reflecting the speaking ability of the presenter, catches your interest? Each phrase consists of words, but while some groups of words inform, others rouse, stir, and summon. People are interested in people, not necessarily in things. Our world is very impersonal and continues to become increasingly so. The better able we are to add an element of humankind that people can relate to, the more closely will the audience identify with us.

Personal stories that involve the speaker and relate in some way to the topic or the audience can serve several purposes. They capture attention, add a humanistic touch, and evoke feelings of emotional closeness between the speaker and the audience (Lustberg, 1988a). From ages past, people have learned about other people through story telling. If no stories are available, telling the audience something unusual about the speaker can be an effective substitute.

If the speaker is unknown to you personally but is well known professionally, a little library research may uncover an inconspicuous personal detail. If your speaker is not well known, sending a letter or calling to conduct an informal interview may reveal obscure trivia. The intent is to create a bond between audience and speaker.

The introduction should fulfill Lustberg’s (1988a) second objective and include comments regarding why we are pleased that the speaker has agreed to present and at the same time, make him or her feel proud to have been invited to this gathering. Adding a phrase such as, “The last time she spoke at one of our conferences, she not only was given a standing ovation but we also continue to receive calls asking us to have her speak again,” communicates that she is very popular with individuals such as those in the audience. The present audience feels compelled to like her even more. The speaker is also feeling proud of past successes and is energized to do well again this time.
The introduction ends with the speaker’s name articulated clearly and pronounced correctly. The audience typically responds with applause, and your job is done.

DELIVERY OF INTRODUCTION
The remaining element of an effective introduction is the delivery of your prepared remarks. Once you’ve written down what you intend to say, you’ll want to practice reading them aloud. As mentioned before, people want to feel as though you are speaking personally to them. We usually write in a style that is more formal and stilted than normal conversation. By practicing aloud, you can modify your notes into short, snappy sentences that convey warmth and familiarity.

Engage your audience as if you were talking informally to one person. If anxiety is a concern, I recommend two ways to calm yourself. The first option is to use creative visualization. Pause and imagine yourself standing in front of the group. You are poised, cool, collected, and calmly delivering the introduction. Just as the Olympic contestants use visualization prior to their winning performances, we can employ this same technique to prepare a mindset conducive to skillfully offering our introductory comments.

Another method of relaxation can be done discreetly and even right before the presentation. Take several deep diaphragmatic breaths, inhaling slowly and exhaling even more slowly, while at the same time giving yourself positive affirmation such as, “I am prepared. I will do my best. I feel confident and composed.” It is also helpful to look into the audience and locate special friendly faces. Speak to these receptive individuals. Stand tall and solid, projecting confidence. Smile. Light up your face with expression. Relax. Enjoy the challenge and appreciate the results of your efforts.

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CONCLUSION
Introductions are the first chance to make an impression on your audience. They can warm up both the audience and the speaker and act as a bridge to the presentation (Leeds, 1988). Regardless of how easy it looks to make an introduction, those who exert the time and energy and thought can transform a mere formality into a poetic prelude.

REFERENCES