

## Chapter 6 Public Presentations

- Public testimony
- Organization-sponsored events
- Dinner talks
- Ways to show data

Taking your show on the road is one of the most effective ways to expand your audience and turn study results into action. Think of yourself as a storyteller: relating the history of your watershed, your project, and its findings. The story can contain drama, unsolved mysteries, and suggested solutions. There are three general categories of public presentations: public testimonies, organization-sponsored events, and dinner talks. The latter may include public meetings and panel discussions.

### Public testimony

This is usually the most targeted of audiences. Members of the public are invited to testify or speak at a hearing or meeting devoted to deciding an issue. These are presentations where you hope to persuade an audience to make an immediate decision (Conservation Commission or town meeting), or to act in the near future (when the legislature takes comments on a proposed bill).

If possible, find out in advance how much time you will be allotted, and plan your presentation accordingly. It's also important to determine ahead of time whether overheads, slides, and other presentation materials can be used. If so, make them colorful, simple, and as large as possible. Bring handouts for committee and audience members to help them remember details of your testimony afterwards. No matter how short your time, keep three goals in mind: *show your data, provide a simple explanation of what it means and how it affects the audience, and request a specific action.* For example: "Water temperatures are high in the Big River below the XYZ Plant. Above the plant, temperatures are within Massachusetts standards. Below the plant, our data show that cold water fishery standards are exceeded 95% of the time between June and September. Trout cannot survive in those temperatures. XYZ Plant's permit must require that they cool their discharge before releasing it to the Big River."

**Tips for public presentations**

- The mountain won't come to you, so go to the mountain! Many organizations are looking for speakers for their regular meetings. Recruit a volunteer to be a booking agent and call organizations to let them know about your presentation.
- Consider ahead of time your audience's occupations, level of experience, and political views—and tailor the presentation to them.
- Set a goal and focus on it—for instance, to get 3 new members, bring brochures, newsletters, and sign-up sheets; to persuade a group to write a letter on the issue, bring sample text and offer to provide it electronically and give them a deadline for comments.

If there is more time, you can elaborate. For instance, describe the value of the trout fishery (show pictures of kids with fish), mention tourism benefits, or discuss cold water fishery ecology. Because it can be difficult to educate people in a short time, it's important to prepare the audience with prior outreach efforts. Examples include sending the target audience your organization's newsletter, data report, or newspaper clippings and information from other organizations, such as reports from agencies and tourism groups.

Public testimony is also given in less formal settings. For example, during a town or selectboard meeting, comments from the audience are frequently allowed. Unless the meeting is solely devoted to your issue, you'll likely be sharing the agenda, limiting presentation time. It's unlikely that any elaborate audiovisual equipment can be used. The presentation should be very portable and simple, such as posters and handout materials.

Keep in mind opportunities to inject drama and humor at meetings. Large, striking photos of a major erosion problem or holding a glass of dirty water in one hand, clean in the other, may become the highlight of the meeting—and tomorrow's paper. Tactful humor and other animated components help keep the audience's attention and improve their retention of information. At "general" meetings, there is a more diverse audience; try to reach out to everyone by making the presentation a *simple human story*. What are the ramifications for residents of the town if pollution continues unabated? Try emotional impact with a brief statement: "Kids swim there!" or ask and answer a provocative question such as: "Are local businesses or property values threatened?" Correlate these statements and discussions to the graphs showing your study's findings.

**More tips for oral presentations**

- Be sure that you state your main point clearly in both the introduction and conclusion. Redundancy in the form of an outline or summary is OK in an oral presentation.
- Script the presentation carefully and rehearse it; a disorganized delivery can hurt your organization, its message, and goal.
- When presenting, stand straight and relaxed and speak clearly and loudly enough to be heard by everyone in the room.
- Make eye contact with people in all parts of the room.



## Organization-sponsored events

- Some gesturing and movement can help keep the presentation dynamic, but be careful not to weave or rock when speaking to an audience.
- Find out in advance how much time you'll have, and stick to it. If possible, rehearse with a stopwatch, tape recorder, or someone who's not familiar with the program.
- Tell the audience the specific action that you are requesting as a result of your presentation and discuss how they can participate.
- Bring what you need to make this action happen: membership application forms, a sign-up sheet, a petition to sign, a proposal to vote up or down, etc.
- For more on polishing your speaking skills, see the Reference section.

Your organization may sponsor a number of public events including volunteer recognition nights, annual meetings, special forums devoted to data presentation, and festivals.

Volunteer recognition events have at least one sure audience: its volunteers! Be sure to also invite local officials; regional, state, and federal agency representatives; and businesses (especially those that have supported your work or wish to engage in the process). The Greater Springfield Area Riverwatch, a consortium of three or four monitoring programs, holds an annual potluck supper where volunteers, local officials, and members of the press and public are invited. Each of the monitoring groups present their data, following the same straightforward format: *results, findings, conclusions, and recommendations*. Reports are distributed, giving those in attendance a sense of the different conditions and issues in different parts of the watershed. Last but not least, volunteers are recognized for their contributions. The press attendance often results in stories being published in newspapers (see Example 6-1).

### Presenting data at annual meetings

Keep the presentation lively and interactive. While the audience has responded to your invitation to hear about the organization's data, they will appreciate more than just graphs and tables. Display a tray with aquatic insects, rocks, vegetation, or an aerator. Include games and other activities so that they will fondly remember the event and take home your information and message.

Annual meetings are similar to volunteer recognition events, but with a broader focus: the accomplishments of the organization, not just the monitoring program. The audience can include the organization's volunteers, its membership, and the general public. A report from the monitoring program should be part of the agenda for every annual meeting. This will be brief: maybe a few slides of summary data charts and photos of volunteers in action; the live presentation version of a newsletter monitoring report. Depending on what time of year the annual meeting is held,

the presentation will either summarize the year's findings or combine an update on recent results with a discussion of upcoming sampling activities.

Data presentation forums are also quite similar to volunteer recognition events, but they generally reach out further beyond the membership of an organization. The Lake Attitash Association released a report at a special meeting devoted to advancing dialogue on the solution to a commercial compost operation affecting the lake. They invited a number of officials as well as the public to a meeting where they gave a two-part talk: the first was focused on their monitoring data and findings, the second divulged their research of state and federal laws and regulations on the issue. The latter part showed what conservation commissions and other officials were empowered to do and how they could help solve the problem. This format makes it easy for decision makers to do the right thing. They were shown the problem, the probable source, and possible solutions. The Association also engendered good will by stressing that the compost farmer was a willing collaborator on the effort.



The Kentucky Water Watch sponsors another type of meeting called "Clean Water Forums." They invite a diverse panel with representatives from groups including businesses, agencies, and academia. Panelists are sent monitoring data ahead of time with a few questions they will be asked. The meeting is advertised and the public and the media are invited. The data are presented to the public, then the prearranged questions are asked of the panel. The audience is then invited to participate in a question and answer session. The goal is to get the audience to help find solutions. Examples of questions asked of the panel include: "What significance do you find in the data?" and "What recommendations would you make?" When audiences are given the chance to generate solutions themselves, their enthusiasm for implementing their recommendations increases.

### **Dinner talks**

Dinner talks (sometimes conducted as breakfast meetings) are commonly a part of monthly meetings held by various civic, social, business, and environmental organizations. The groups can vary widely, from garden clubs, to gun owner associations, to boards of trade. All have some interest in water quality, though they may not have made a direct connection from your study to their concerns. The primary reason that you have been invited to present at their meeting is to provide entertainment and information. Visual aids are a necessity in this venue: give a slide show, present a short video, or pass around jars containing aquatic bugs or plants. Dinner talks are probably best used for information or education, not persuasion. Use a dinner talk to build relations or to get people interested in an issue. Follow up later with their board or executive committee if a specific action is requested. While this is generally not the venue to ask for action or commitment, many of these organizations have a community service component and are looking for projects in which to become involved. Make your sampling program or organization attractive to them with the goal of recruiting new volunteer monitors, a truck for the shoreline cleanup day, or a crew to staff a river festival.

### **Ways to show data**

To engage the audience, your presentation should include visual aids. No matter how polished your speaking style, experts say that well-designed visual aids increase comprehension and retention of information by 50% to 200%! Presentation tools can include flip charts, use of a blackboard, overhead transparencies, slides, hands-on materials,

and video tapes. You should also have handout information, such as your group's brochure, recent newsletter, fact sheets, or report summary. For further information on how to create effective graphics materials, see Chapter 3.



### Flip charts and easel boards

Flip charts are an inexpensive way to visually present information. You don't need electricity, a projector, or a darkened room. If flip charts are used to show data, be sure that they have a professional appearance.

A blank pad of flip chart paper on an easel or an erasable board can be used to ask the audience questions such as, "Who knows some water quality concerns in Blue Lake?" and write down their answers. When they have finished, add any they didn't mention. Try conducting a poll by asking what the audience *thinks* the bacteria levels were after last month's rains. Record the number of answers in each category: clean, moderately, or heavily polluted. Then flip the chart (or draw a graph) to show actual levels you recorded. Draw or list items as the presentation proceeds. This presentation strategy can be more engaging than flipping through a prepared list or graphic, because it builds participation and anticipation. Be sure that the presenter has clear, easy-to-read printing. Or, try drawing a simple bar graph of dissolved oxygen values, filling in each successive week as weather or other events are described that may have influenced each week's results. If there is a week where dissolved oxygen levels dropped below standards, ask the audience what the impact might be, and draw a belly-up fish on the graph.

### Overhead Transparencies

Overhead transparencies can be less compelling than slides, but are very useful to show results in color. Consider limiting their use to displaying data and brief, bulleted text.

If you decide not to use a flip chart, overhead transparencies can be a good substitute. Write directly on the overhead sheet with a transparency marker, as you would on the flip chart. This is especially useful when leading an exercise or eliciting suggestions from the audience, enabling you to write down ideas without turning your back to the audience. When carefully prepared, overhead transparencies can be used to present multiple data layers. For instance, start with a map of the watershed, showing color-coded land use categories. Place a second transparency on top that

shows river reaches with color codes for different sediment levels, to illustrate how certain land uses appear to be linked to increased sedimentation.

**Slide shows**

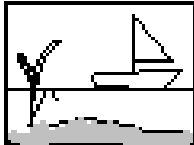
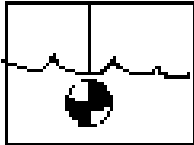
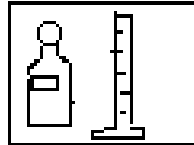
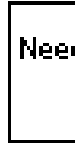
Using slides is often the most informative and interesting presentation format. Slides allow you to show not only maps and graphs, but also photos of your watershed study areas, volunteers, equipment, flora and fauna, and other compelling images. Titles can be added to images for extra impact. This format also allows for a smooth and cohesive presentation: the lights are usually dimmed which helps filter out distractions and there is no awkward transition and adjustments as when changing overhead transparencies.



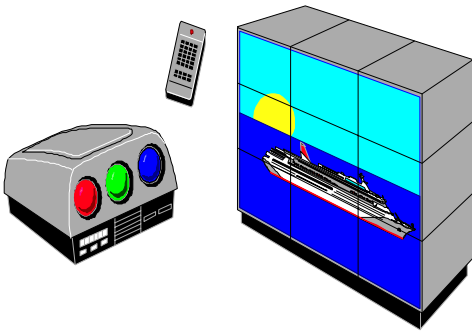
**Example 6-2: A slide with number in corner. Should you drop your slides, the numbering will help you to quickly put them back in order.**

Be sure to include a healthy mix of photographs and other images with your data graphs and tables. Most audiences' attention will be lost if they have to view too many graphs. Use sequential slides to draw in the audience and keep them interested. For instance, show volunteers in a boat using the Secchi disk, then a close-up of the disk, and then a bar chart showing recorded Secchi depths. Accompanying narration should explain how the disk is used and what is the significance of the Secchi depth. A slide of swimmers, a sign warning of danger to swimmers, a graph of fecal coliform counts, and then a shot of cattle standing in a stream is another example of effectively mixing data and image slides to make a strong statement.

To help organize a presentation, create a "storyboard" by writing a script of narration next to a description of each slide image. This planning tool will help create a more professional slide show, estimate presentation time, and determine where additional images might be needed.

			
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**Example 6-3: Part of a storyboard for a slide presentation.**



### Multimedia presentations

The newest medium for presentations is use of a multimedia projector with content created in software such as Microsoft PowerPoint or SPC Harvard Graphics. The software allows creation of “slides” on a computer. The slides can be printed on overhead transparencies and a service bureau can create slides in a 35mm format for use with a conventional projector, but the real benefit to this option is that sound and animation can be added for use with a multimedia projector for a dynamic presentation. Handouts of the presentation can be printed in a variety of formats, allowing the audience to have typed, take-home notes (be sure to include contact information in your slides so that it will be on the handouts).

This “best of both worlds” choice requires access to a computer (preferably a notebook computer) at the presentation along with a multimedia projector. While costs for notebook computer and multimedia projector are a significant investment, it can pay for itself in a number of ways. Quickly and easily, changes or customizations can be made to a presentation to suit its audience and there is no cost to produce slides. If the facility at which you’re presenting has the hardware, all that is needed is a disk with the presentation on it.

#### Tips for multimedia presentations:

- Be sure to bring a diskette with the fonts and sound clips included in the presentation—just in case the “pack-and-go” option doesn’t work perfectly.
- Use color and pattern carefully to categorize data or other information.
- Make sure that text size is large enough to be viewed from all parts of the room.
- Images and sounds should enhance your message, not distract from it.
- Print the presentation on overhead transparencies, in the event the hardware isn’t working properly.
- Be sure to provide sufficient quantities of handouts from the presentation.

For a comparison on different presentation media, see the Reference section.

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## Video

Videos are not by nature conducive to live presentations and are infrequently used in them. Unlike a slide show where the speaker can depart from the script or interrupt the talk to field questions, videos tend to stifle dialogue while the program is running. They have their uses, however. For instance, run a short video on lake ecology just before you present graphs of nutrient and Secchi data. Videos can serve as a surrogate for a speaker who cannot be present. You can tape your data presentation beforehand, someone else can show it at a forum and have the audience discuss it afterwards.

Videos also make high-quality graphics and animation possible, but many groups won't have sufficient resources or expertise to create their own professional quality video. It may be possible to include videos produced by others in your presentation, as in the above-mentioned educational video. The speaker should be prepared to provide follow-up comments and answer questions about the video.

What if a video is too long or too broad in scope to use at a public meeting? Try using excerpts, such as copying just the hydrologic cycle and pollution transport sequences from the above-mentioned lake ecology video for use with your talk (check copyright laws). Alternatively, have an assistant on hand to cue the tape from one excerpt to another while you continue the talk. Make sure to rehearse in advance so that the presentation runs smoothly. Short segments that your group videotapes can be useful if you want to illustrate dynamic situations in the watershed. A 20-second clip of eroding banks in a rainstorm or cows in a stream can make powerful statements in support of the data.

If you decide to produce your own video, avoid static shots of graphs and charts. You can accomplish this with "dissolves" and other techniques that animate the graphs, but these may require assistance from video professionals (check with your local public access cable network). Another way is to have someone discuss the charts in TV weatherperson style: talk about the results as you point to different findings on your charts, hold up a photo to make a point, etc. This works particularly well when you want to provide some context for your data—background watershed ecology education, a discussion of consequences of the data, or recommendations for action.

**Tips for using videotape in a presentation**

- Check the room ahead of time to make sure it can be darkened and that there is a power source for electrical equipment.
- If you aren't sure if the facility can provide the right equipment, be sure to provide an alternate source.
- Try out the equipment on site ahead of time to make sure that the VCR and television work.
- Video presentations work best for smaller groups and rooms—make sure that all of the audience can see the screen.

**No-frills alternative**

There are occasions and events where it isn't possible to bring flip charts or a projector to a presentation. As an alternative, make photocopies of graphics such as maps and graphs, and hand them out as a packet that the audience views while you comment each page.

**Audience participation and hands-on materials**

Coming up with ways of involving members of the audience in your presentation adds interest and fun—not to mention better retention of the information you have shared. Ask questions, draw on their concerns and local knowledge, or create a short quiz at the end of your presentation (tell your audience before you begin so that they'll pay better attention). See Chapter 8 for more ideas on this venue.

**In conclusion**

Live presentations take more preparation and repeated effort than do printed materials, but they can be one of the most effective ways to persuade and inspire people. Data can effectively fit into your live presentation as long as it's customized for each audience and integrated with other kinds of information.

