# Online Speaker Skills

Abstract: Presenting in an online format can be challenging due to a disconnect between the speaker and the audience. In this 20-minute session, Carlyn Chatfield, manager for IT technical communications for Rice University, will give both strong and weak examples of online presentations and offer guidelines to help speakers make the most of their virtual conference sessions. Carlyn facilitates the monthly IT Communicators Virtual Coffee Shop for EDUCAUSE and has led 15 live EDUCAUSE conference presentations and workshops.

## Intro

Hi, I’m Carlyn Chatfield from Rice University in Houston, Texas and I’ve been asked to share some of my tips for online presenters at the 2012 West-Southwest Regional Conference in Portland, Oregon.

Once each month, a group of my colleagues - other IT Communicators - get together in a virtual coffee shop sponsored by EDUCAUSE.  In the virtual coffee shop, we rarely use video feeds of the presenter, but speakers do load slides into Adobe Connect to use during the session and speakers also share their desktops.  One of the participants (usually me) will scribe the session in the EDUCAUSE wiki, including the chat notes.  You can find details about our monthly coffee shop in the EDUCAUSE wiki: <http://www.educause.edu/wiki/Virtual+Coffee+Shop>

Based on my three years of facilitating and speaking in these coffee shops, my presentation today will cover how to be a good participant in online meetings as well as how to prepare for and lead an online session. Checking out some of the speaker resources made me realize how much I still have to learn about online meetings and presentations. Truthfully, the more I learned about great online presentations, the less confident I felt about talking with you. I think my own style just plugged my live presentation skills into an online environment – it was like when my mom first left messages on my voice mail (back in the day when you had to buy a separate device that attached to your telephone and recorded your messages on cassette tapes). She would always close by saying, “Love, Mom” like she was leaving a written message. And I think that is how a lot of us approach new tools - by trying what we know works in an old tool. So you may learn more from my mistakes in this online presentation than from my suggestions!

After talking you through participation and speaker tips for online sessions, I will tell you two stories from my days in radio, and then spend a few minutes on how to prepare a presentation and where to find resources. Let’s get started!

In the beginning of the presentation, I have several lists of tips and I don’t want to read them to you and YOU don’t want me to read them to you so I am going to give you only the highlights and then allow you 5 seconds of silence to read through the tip list and start submitting questions.

Before you are a speaker, you are usually a participant, so we’ll begin with tips for anyone participating in an online session:

## Set up for Your Online Meeting

**Enter quiet mode (turn off cell phones) and mute, but don’t ever use HOLD** [count to 8 seconds here]

* + Silence your cell phone before entering session
  + Forward your office phone to voicemail before entering session
  + Close your office door before entering session and put a sign on it “in webinar until noon”

1. Mute your phone when not talking but NEVER use HOLD
   * Muting your phone blocks the background noises you don’t even hear any more, from keyboard typing (even “quiet” keys aren’t completely silent) to sandwich wrappers to conversations in the hallway outside your office.  And if you are working from home, you will be treating your colleagues to dogs barking, doorbells ringing, children crying, TV shows, radio and iTunes music…we’ve heard it all in teleconferences in the last year.
   * Putting your phone on HOLD is a worse offense.  If someone comes into your office with a crisis, just leave your phone on mute and turn the volume down as low as it will go to conduct your conversation.  When you put your conference phone on HOLD, it treats the rest of your colleagues to music and/or announcements about your institution, over-riding the speaker’s voice and presentation.

## Participate in an Online Meeting

**Ask questions, make suggestions, share mike time** [count to 5 seconds here]

* Post questions as you think of them to the chat notes; the speaker will work them into their presentation or take them at the end of a section
* Add suggestions, URLS and comments via chat notes for reference later
* To participate in a group discussion, don’t forget to unmute to offer your comments and return your phone to mute after you’ve finished speaking
* In a group discussion, don’t hog the conversation; offer your opinion and your voice sparingly
* Brief **voice recognition** reminder (This is Carlyn from Rice) should preface any statement or question in an online group discussion

## Facilitating an Online Meeting

**Session leaders and facilitators, be gentle** with participants; if someone forgot to mute their phone, or put their phone on hold, in all likelihood, this is their first online meeting.

* Tune in to your channels (audio and web) 10-15 minutes before the session starts
* Welcome guests as they arrive, particularly if you hear the beep on a phone line that indicates a new person had joined the meeting.  “Hello, this is Carlyn at Rice, who else is out there?”
* Give early guests an idea of when you will get started. “Hi, this is Carlyn at Rice University and we have about 5 minutes before the meeting starts.  Remember to mute your phones and we’ll get started shortly.”
* OR try allowing everyone to talk about where they are from, what kind of weather they are experiencing, etc. until time to start and then saying, “now it is time to mute your phones.”

## Presenting for an Online Meeting

Session speakers, allow the meeting facilitator or moderator to introduce you and then provide your own gentle reminder if the facilitator hasn’t just done so. “Thank you [facilitator name]! This is Carlyn Chatfield and I am the manager for technical communications at Rice University in Houston, Texas.  Before I begin my slides and presentation, please mute your phones.   I’ll take questions as they arise on the chat.  If I miss your question, I’ll stop for questions several times during the presentation and you can unmute your phones to ask your question at that time.  Let’s get started….”

## Be a better online speaker than you are in person!

As an online presenter, you have to **raise the effort** you put into your presentation to make it interesting to remote listeners and/or watchers but you should also **lower your audience expectations**. On raising your effort: it is much more difficult to feel engaged with an online audience, you are missing the visual cues you get from a live audience. When you see a live audience really focused on what you are saying, and you can tell they “get it” and your voice gets louder and you are really connecting with them… all that is missing in an online presentation so YOU have to be engaged. If you are really interested and engaged in your presentation, you will carry your audience along with you. Regarding lowering your expectations for your audience, online participation is new to most of us and we are still learning to use the tools. It may be embarrassing to ask a question if you aren’t sure how you are coming across. You may be unsure of whether you can say something about your institution, particularly if it will be recorded and made available on the web.

* Speak into the microphone - don’t turn your head!
* Slow down your speech; **we can’t hear as fast as you can talk**
* **No slide reading**; we can read A LOT faster than you can talk
* Be interesting; look and sound interested in your topic
* Use landline for audio when possible
* Don’t turn your head away from the microphone
* Expect to be the expert; you will be seen as the expert whether or not you have ever used the tool before
* Encourage participation, call on people by name if participants total less than 20
* If no participation or questions in Q&A time, end the session early
* Don’t nag participants (frequent reminders to mute your phones, “please stop typing” or “someone shut up that dog”)
* Don’t promise “I’m not going to force you into death-by-powerpoint” then do it anyway
* If using video and you are on camera, avoid wearing red or stripes
* If you are sharing your desktop, check what the audience is seeing by reviewing the session on a separate computer. (For example, I present through my dual monitor PC but check my slides and shared desktop on my Macbook Pro.) This is particularly critical if you have dual monitors.
* **Presenters, prepare! no winging it.**
* Clarify audience and topic in beginning
* Introduce yourself, get someone to scribe notes if applicable (meetings, discussion forums)
* The audience will only remember 1-3 points from a 45-minute presentation, use slides and resources for participants to reading/review later
* If you share the platform with other speakers, the audience will only retain 1 point from each speaker so be brief
* **Write like you talk.** Someone wrote an intro for me and used the word “definitive.” I can read and understand what “definitive” means but I never SAY it. I had to practice getting my mouth around it. ☺
* SET UP THAT DAY: Have your **favorite beverage** ready to sip in case you start to cough
  + Having your favorite beverage handy also relaxes you; think of this as a cozy fireside chat and be comfortable in your chair, at your desk, with your subject matter
  + Don’t worry about your hair or makeup, at 72 dpi, you aren’t going to look either fabulous or awful
  + Clean up your messy campus office or home office if the camera is going to capture it. One day, the campus flooded before a co-worker arrived and she had to work from home; we used Skype for our important meeting and I kept looking at her kitchen cabinets.

You can find all these lists of tips in the electronic handout for this session on the Educause web site

## Radio Stories: Dead Air and Other Problems

If you are a new online presenter and feeling a little nervous about your performance, you might like this story. My second job after college was selling advertising space for a radio station. We had a spry engineer who must have been about 70 and an antenna was probably older than he was and it always seemed to be breaking down. We worked out of an old house in a rural community but we broadcast over a 100 miles in all directions. Now I was hired several weeks before the new FM station went on the air and my job was to sell ad space for both the FM pop music station as well as the AM country-western station, and I had a 4-hour Saturday afternoon board shift on the AM station. I was really nervous about being on the air. Somehow, I felt natural giving presentations in person, but I was afraid of making mistakes or messing up the music or commercials on air. Curly, the station manager, sat me down with the two turn tables and microphone and showed me how to set the needle on the vinyl record and back up the turntable a quarter of a turn so when the turntable hit full speed, the record would start at the right place. That was called queue-ing a record. If I could have played music without ever turning on my microphone, I might have been fine. This probably sounds like quite an adventure to you, but I was terrified of what I would sound like on the air. To make a long story short, I was so nervous, I started crying. Loud. Thank goodness my microphone was off! Curly was standing just outside the door of the sound room and he would let me play a few records and cry with my microphone off, but then he would come in and prompt me, “Carlyn, stop crying and tell people the time.” That was about the worst performance I’ve ever given in the 30+ years since I graduated from college. And the funny thing is, I was all worked up for nothing. My uncle called when it was finally over; he was my only relative in that area and he’d help me get the job. He called up and congratulated me on my first show. “I was awful!” I exclaimed. “Well, less than 200 people listen on Saturday afternoons anyway,” he laughed. And I realized I had spent a lot of anxiety on a performance that would not impact many lives, much less haunt me the rest of my career. The moral of this tale is, “don’t think about how many people MIGHT be tuning into your online meeting.” Just talk as if you are on the phone with one or two people who have called up to find out how you do something at your school, or how you handle a project or initiative.

There is one more radio phrase that has bearing for online speakers. It has to do with dead air. In radio, silence is called dead air, and it is bad. Real bad. The only hook you have in your audience is sound, and you have to plan carefully to make sure you have smooth segues between songs, commercials, announcements or speakers. When you allow 2-3 seconds of silence to elapse, your listener is probably going to change the channel. Unfortunately, bringing up a brand new FM station on a really old antenna resulted in a lot of problems and we experienced dead air a number of times the first year. I used to set my radio alarm clock to wake up to the FM pop station and I can tell you, when my alarm went off and there was dead air, my day was off to a pretty bad start.

Your audience for an online discussion-style meeting is not quite as fickle as a radio audience, but you still have to guard against dead air. In a live conversation, you may wait 5-10 seconds after asking a question for your colleagues to think about and give their answers. In an online meeting, don’t wait more than 2-3 seconds before changing tactics or asking the question in a different way. If you DO need to give your online audience time to think about a question, then tell them you are going to give them 10 or 15 seconds to think of questions or make comments in the chat.

If your online meeting is not discussion-style, you probably won’t have to deal with dead air, but you might have to deal with technical difficulties. No matter how familiar you are with your online meeting tool, things go wrong from time to time. Stay calm. If you are the facilitator, have the email addresses of participants handy just in case you have to postpone the meeting. If you are the speaker, just wait for your facilitator to handle the problem. In one of our coffee shops, we were trying to use VOIP instead of a phone line for the audio channel. If there were 15 participants in the guest list, at least 10 of them were writing in the chat notes to say they had no audio. We had to postpone the coffee shop for a week – and that decision was made on the spur of the moment when we finally realized we were not going to be able to proceed. What is the worst thing that can happen if you have technical difficulties? Think about worst-case scenarios ahead of time and make mental plans for what you will do if your slides don’t load or advance, if your video goes out or if your audio malfunctions. If you plan for these mishaps, you’ll be ready if/when you do have to cancel or postpone an online meeting due to technical difficulties.

## Creating a Presentation for Live or Online Meetings

**Congratulations! Your proposal was accepted or you have received an invitation to speak on your area of expertise. After you say “yes, I’ll be there,” then what?**

Get the details: how long will you be talking, how many people will attend, how much do they already know about the topic, how long do you have to prepare before the presentation?

**Start jotting down notes** as they occur to you. Ask your colleagues what you do or know about the topic that could benefit others. Think about what your university does differently or perhaps better in this area. No need to write complete sentences, just brainstorm for a few weeks. With EDUCAUSE conference presentations, your invitation or proposal acceptance occurs several months before your presentation is given. In less formal presentations, say in the monthly virtual coffee shop, you may get only 2-3 weeks notice for a 15 minute presentation. The less formal presentations don’t require as much preparation, and they are a good way to get experience presenting on your topic. Next, **start up a time line of tentative deadlines** for yourself **and work backwards**. Two weeks before your presentation date, your presentation should be complete so you can just practice it**. Your goal is to “own”** your material by your presentation date; two weeks should give you enough time to practice the presentation 10 times with your laptop and in front of a mirror. Give yourself another two weeks to **create the Prezi**, SlideRocket, or (sigh, if you absolutely have no other option) PowerPoint slides. Before you create the electronic presentation, you need to **collect your materials, images, cartoons**, quotes, and so forth. Before you collect your materials, you have **to complete your outline**. Before your complete your outline, you have to plan your direction and how you will divide up your time. That brings us back to your brainstorming. Now that I’ve made you think about your presentation backwards, let’s start again from the invitation to speak.

## Fourteen Weeks to a Professional Presentation (15 minutes each work day)

1. Week One: Confirm with your supervisor that you can make the conference. If time, current or future projects, or travel expenses are an issue, carve out the amount of time you can give to your presentation. If your boss says you can have one week to prepare for your presentation in the afternoons, you won’t be able to speak for more than 15 or 20 minutes, and most of your preparation will have to occur after work hours. If you are working with a panel, you will need at least three one-hour conference calls to work out the details of your presentation; then each of the panel members will work on their part of the presentation on their own between conference calls.
2. Week Two: Begin your brainstorming notes. Keep them in one place or keep an envelope handy for when you jot down ideas on different scraps of paper.
3. Week Three: Brainstorming continues
4. Week Four: Divide up your presentation time into segments for introduction of the topic, 5 minutes for each key point (up to four) and time for Q&A. If you are leading a workshop, carve out time for interaction among the participants and determine how an online audience can interact with each other. At a bare minimum, your online conference tool will have a chat notes section. Some online conferencing tools also provide break out rooms.
5. **Week Five: Write out your outline, but also write out your script of exactly what you will say. In my case, I write out bullet points that I want to cover and then I begin writing paragraphs before and after the bullet lists. These paragraphs are my script. I write down exactly what I plan to say. If I want to tell the Volvo story, I will not leave a general note like “tell the Volvo story here,” I will actually write out the Volvo story. The reason I write every word I plan to say is so I can time myself. Yes, time myself. One of the reasons you will practice your final presentation 10-12 times is so you can time each section and compare it to your outline.**
6. Week Six: Keep writing on your outline and script.
7. Week Seven: Begin reading your script out loud. Don’t worry about the electronic presentation yet, just determine how long it takes to say all your words out loud, and say them slowly enough that a listener can keep up.
8. Week Eight: Begin collecting materials that illustrate your points.
9. **Week Nine: Create the outline of key words that will help you move through your presentation. You should have your presentation memorized for the most part, that is how you “own” the material. I’m not talking about regurgitating a memorized poem or speech. I’m talking about knowing exactly how you are going to make your points and what stories or jokes you will tell and when each point comes during the presentation. You won’t read your script (if you do, you can’t make eye contact with your audience). But all of us lose our place or get distracted at least once when we are speaking; the key words help us remember what is important and guide us in covering the points in the order we want to make. Notice I said key words. Not key sentences, not key paragraphs. Key words are the only words that go in your presentation slides.**
10. Week Ten: Open your electronic presentation tool and create slides or groupings for your key words and make sure the order is correct.
11. Week Eleven: Begin inserting the materials (images, cartoons, quotes, etc.) into or in place of your key words. There are a number of places to find images, cartoons and quotes, but you need to be careful with copyrights. Just because you can right click it doesn’t mean you can use it in your presentation. If you want to be completely safe, use only the images and cartoons you create yourself. Most of us don’t have either the time or talent to create images and cartoons, so we borrow. Creative Commons – in my own experience - is a great place for images and music, but I spent a lot of time looking there for cartoons on communication without success. Even in Creative Commons, you have to watch the copyright notes and you may still have to ask for permission to use something you really like. **There are a number of resources for presentation materials** and I only know a few of them, but I’ll share the resources I’ve found helpful for my field of expertise (communications). For my 90-minute workshop on Interpersonal Communication Skills, I used the following resources for images and cartoons. Note: some of the cartoons or images required payment, ranging from $8 to $15 for a single presentation use.
    * Creative Commons - <http://search.creativecommons.org/>
    * (Image) Stock Exchange - <http://www.sxc.hu/>
    * Istock Photo (requires payment) – http://www.istockphoto.com
    * Paul Taylor’s cartoons - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cartoonsbyspud>
    * Off the Mark (syndicated cartoons) - [www.offthemark.com](http://www.offthemark.com)
    * Cartoon Stock - <http://www.cartoonstock.com/>
    * Images from [*Ost Trifft West*](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_ss_c_1_10?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=ost+trifft+west&sprefix=ost+trifft%2Caps%2C196)– I purchased the book then emailed the author for permission; she approved the use of any three sets of image comparisons.
    * Quotes – from books I owned, attributed to the author and book
    * Quotes - <http://www.think.exist.com>
    * Quotes - <http://www.leadershipnow.com>
    * Quotes – make up your own!
12. Week Twelve: **Begin practicing your presentation with the electronic tool containing your key words and images.**
13. Week Thirteen: Keep practicing.
14. Week Fourteen: Present!

## More Speaker Resources

* Safari Reading Room and Resources (provided by EDUCAUSE to conference speakers; need login) <http://techbus.safaribooksonline.com/mysafari?uicode=educause>
* Jonathan Finkelstein’s top 10 list (Create Lasting Memories through Online Events) <http://brainzooming.com/create-lasting-memories-in-online-events-10-ways-to-do-it/10783/>
* Quick one-minute video-podcasts with online teaching tips by Jonathan Finkelstein <http://www.learninginrealtime.com/minute/>
* Tips from a speaker who “owns” her/his weekly presentations: “I do just what you're saying...go over it again and again until it's memorized.  Frequently if I'm quoting a book, though, I not only have the book with the passage marked, but I have some hidden notes in there, too. Also I use a LOT of mnemonics!”