

Tips for Performances

By Barb Lachman, Shorewood High School, Shoreline, WA

You can do this! If you have performance skills, poise and don't mind speaking in front of a group, this is a good way to showcase your research. If you lack some of these skills, don't panic...you can still do this! This handout is intended to give you some tips to make your presentation more interesting and powerful. (You'll also think of creative things that I'd never dream of!) REMEMBER: You don't have to be the most amazing actor to have a great performance. Use the tips and do what all good performers do: create a performance that uses your strengths!

What skills or resources do you have?

- Acting
- Memorization
- Other arts - visual art, instrumental or vocal music, dance
- A person or place with information, period props, or clothing

I. CONTENT. Creating your script is the first step. Think about the things below as you work.

A. Thesis. All of your content should be very strongly connected to your thesis. It doesn't matter how interesting or artistic part of your performance is if it doesn't add essential information to your thesis!

B. Sequence. Think of your performance as a journey for the audience. Each piece of information should take them closer to your conclusion. Put all the elements of your facts, primary testimony and performance into an order that tells the story of your journey in stages. Each idea should connect onto the one before it.

C. Types of Elements. Include a variety of elements to keep interest, but be true to your thesis.

- Facts- narrated evidence that is not a quote
- Primary Sources- quotations from a particular person that can be acted in character.
- Invented Script- a scripted "scene" that you write which represents a typical situation or a reconstructed historical event.
- Other performance-dance, song, music, pantomimed action

II. BLOCKING. This is movement of people within your acting space. Create a variety of different arrangements considering the factors below. Think about how the symbolism of your blocking will complement your message.

A. Levels. How could you use props that complement your thesis to vary performance levels? Try to use these props, boxes, stools or chairs to have some variety of levels. Think about the different levels you could use naturally- standing on the floor or

platform, sitting on a chair or floor, kneeling, lying down. In general, people at a higher level seem to have greater control or power. Consider this as you plan your movement.

- B. Areas.** Parts of your acting area that are "downstage" (closer to your audience) are stronger; you can have your most important information delivered there. "Stage right" is the left side of the stage as the audience looks at it. This is the strongest side of the stage. "Down center" or the center area closest to the audience is also strong. Use all areas of your acting area, but you can highlight certain parts of your performance by using these areas. Use asymmetrical arrangements to add visual variety. In a group performance have a narrator down right while others pantomime action in the up left area or vice versa.
- C. Arrangements for Group Performances.** Patterns created by actor placement and movement can send visual messages to an audience.
- Triangles - Our eyes like to look at interesting patterns. In a group of three or more people, you can block your action to make triangles.
 - Diagonals- They communicate excitement or conflict. Put performers at diagonals from each other, and add to the diagonals by being on different levels.
 - Straight Lines- They can help complement a feeling of conformity, order or discipline.
 - Circular Patterns-Circles and curves help create a feeling of peace, contentment or luxury.
 - Tableau- This is a "picture" in 3-D with your performers frozen in position. A series of pictures could tell a story or just one could highlight a point. You could also have performers jump out of the picture to say a line or make a movement. Decide whether transitions between tableaus should be sharp and sudden or smooth and melting to complement your content.
 - Contrast- To focus attention on one actor, the highlighted person should do something different. He or she could be alone in an area, be at a different level, be moving while others are still or vice versa. The audience will look at a person whose position or movement contrasts with others.

III. ACTING/STAGE PRESENCE.

A. Basics. Everyone needs to have these elements below going for them.

1. Movement

- Strong, confident posture without nervous rocking, pacing or fidgeting
- Well-planned movement during blocking changes
- Variety of movement styles for characters, so the audience can see (as well as hear) that a different character is talking

2. Voice

- Projection - Use a strong voice that is appropriate for the room size (not too quiet or loud).
- Articulation - Pronounce every sound clearly. This is CRUCIAL for an audience to understand you, and it is a very common problem that can destroy a good performance. Get help for this.
- Rate - You need to speak slower than normal for a large group to hear you.
- Vocal Variety - Use changes in pitch, volume, pause, rate and emphasis to communicate clearly and to create different voices for each character.
- Accents - Use them only if you can create them very realistically. Otherwise, you may be perceived as making fun of people. When in doubt, go without.

B. **Transitions.** To create transitions from characters to narration.

- Narration is delivered in your own voice in a conversational and natural tone with eye contact given to the audience.
- Character voices are delivered in a more exaggerated tone with a voice that may be unlike your own. Choose a focal point to look at if you're not looking at a fellow performer.

C. **Style.** Don't make your acting too exaggerated. Characters that are natural and more realistic are received better than overdone acting, which can look corny and amateurish.

D. **Elements.** Remember to include those areas where you have special talents, if you can. Think about including dance, music, and more character acting if that's what you do well.

IV. **STAGING** (Sets, Props, and Costuming) For a lot of reasons it's best to keep this simple, and that's why it's the last thing to consider. You can get more power out of a few strong, symbolic choices than an elaborate set that you have to load and drag and set up. Make a few strong choices that take advantage of your abilities.

A. **Setting.** Consider the following when designing your set:

- Platforms (or boxes, chairs, stools, etc.)- They add level variety and interest to the scene.
- Backdrop-It serves a dual purpose to set the mood and give you a place to hide props or change costumes. Use fabric instead of butcher paper. It will last longer, it looks better, and muslin isn't that expensive. Support for the drop can be created from partition screens, particleboard or a framework of PVC pipe. Create something that folds smaller and can fit in a car or van. (If you're good, you may have to get this on a plane!)
- Lighting- This isn't crucial for most, but perhaps the addition of a large flashlight as a "spotlight" or a lamp will add something to your concept.

B. **Props.** Choose some simple suggestive items to highlight your points. These could be accurate for the time period or they could be symbolic. (For example: a scroll could symbolize a college education).

C. **Costumes.** Keep in mind that these have to be simple if quick changes are necessary.

Here are some ideas:

- Keep your general clothing simple and suggestive of the thesis or time period. You don't want to distract from what you're saying by having an elaborate costume. The only exception might be for a performance in which you are playing the same character all throughout.
- Add simple pieces to suggest characters-jackets, vests, hats, scarves, shawls, etc.
- Caution: Make your costume changes smooth and simple. Even if you can duck behind a screen to make a change, if you do this often it becomes annoying or dull. Try to make changes simply so they can occur right in front of the audience or in a weaker (upstage) area. Try to make a costume change part of the transition of your content.

Finally, HAVE FUN! A performance is a lot of work, but it may be the most effective way to communicate your thesis. If you are passionate about your topic, your enthusiasm will be obvious to your judges and audience. And, if you care and have fun, they will too.