ORAL PRESENTATIONS IN MARKETING COURSES: STUDENT ATTITUDES AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

Oral presentations represent important exercises for developing real-world communications and leadership skills. At the same time, they present unique challenges for marketing faculty in areas such as grading criteria, course weighting, and the impact of team participation. This paper explores student attitudes towards such oral presentations, based on results from a survey with nearly 100 respondents. Issues surveyed include preferences towards grading approaches, assessment of individual competencies, and attitudes towards the value of such presentations.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing education continues to focus itself on preparing students for the actual skills and competencies they will need in their careers, leading in turn to a necessary shift from pure classroom instruction toward active, experiential learning. Given the role of marketing as a science of promoting products and ideas, the ability to communicate clearly to groups of people represents a basic competency for its graduates. As a result, oral presentations tied in with project work are increasingly finding their way in undergraduate marketing courses.

At the same time, the growth of oral presentations opens up some important pedagogical questions for marketing educators, including:

- How should the quality of an oral presentation factor in the grading of a marketing project, and how can we best assess this quality?
- What should the influence be of team participation on a marketing project and oral presentation, and in particular, what are appropriate boundaries for the assessment of individual participation within a team project?
- Which stakeholders should be involved in the assessment of an oral presentation – the faculty member alone, the students who form the audience for an oral presentation, and/or the team members who can best judge individual levels or participation?
- What are the attitudes of students themselves toward these oral presentations, and what factors and competencies do they feel are important?

Oral presentation skills are an essential part of the communications processes that lie at the heart of all marketing endeavors, and there is a growing realization that these must be cultivated by marketing educators, as evidenced by an increasing trend to include both oral and written assignment in marketing course syllabi (Martin 1990). Corporate recruiters openly seek prospective marketing employees with excellent written and oral communication skills (Hawes and Foley 2006), and the lack of these skills has been cited as a key argument that business school education is losing its effectiveness (Armstrong 2004, Armstrong 2005). A study by Ferris (1998) showed that formal speaking was ranked highest among seven specific listening or speaking skills by students themselves, who also indicated little exposure to formal speaking in their classes, and a desire for further training in oral skills.

As a result, numerous authors have encouraged the development of courses directed toward the development of written and oral communication skills (McCole 2004). Scholars have suggested that these skills are best learned through involvement exercises with structured feedback, and not from listening to lectures on marketing theories (Young 2002). Lyke and Young (2006) have asserted that deep cognitive strategies (e.g., expanding on the course material through term projects and oral presentations reporting on these projects) generally produce better

understanding of course material than do surface strategies (Pintrich and Garcia 1991), such as reading and repeating ideas learned in the course, and students who employ these strategies are likely to be more engaged with the material than are students who employ surface strategies.

A study conducted by Carroll (2006) showed that presentations and role plays were regarded as the most important topic covered in sales related academic curriculum by both professors and sales professionals (Parker et al. 1996) While Carroll notes a relative lack of studies on best practices for assessing oral business presentations, one area that has been researched to some degree is the use of peer assessment techniques for these skills. Several studies show potential benefits and adequate reliability for this approach, while raising potential issues such as adequate training for raters, consistency of peer assessment criteria, and potential bias in areas such as gender, educational background, or participation in the development of criteria. (Topping 1998, Campbell et al 2001, Langan et al. 2005), although a more recent study by Pinar and Girard (2006) shows no consistent patterns that substantiate gender bias.

Given the dearth of studies directed at oral presentations as a whole, the study discussed in this paper was designed to elicit the opinions of students from a standpoint of consumers of marketing education, to inform the design of effective oral presentation assignments and their assessment criteria for future marketing course programs. By analyzing and interpreting this data we can better fine-tune these efforts over the life cycle of a student's post-secondary education. These results, in turn, provides an effective composite picture of student attitudes toward oral presentations within the context of their marketing courses, and their own perceived sense of the importance of such presentations as part of their project work and overall educational experience.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was administered via electronic mail to students at a liberal arts college on the East Coast approximately two months after the conclusion of the spring term, containing 15 questions designed to explore student attitudes towards various aspects of oral presentations including their grading, the impact of team participation, an assessment of individual competencies, and the importance of these presentations, along with demographic information. The survey group consisted of students who have taken a Principles of Marketing Course, students on record as having registered for this course in the next academic term, plus a smaller sample of students from a broad range of academic backgrounds serving in this school's Student Senate. A total of **94** responses were received, with representation from freshman through senior class levels ranging from 15% to 32% of total respondents, and approximately a 2 to 1 ratio of females to males (64 versus 30). A majority of respondents (55) were students of business, and nearly two-thirds (61.7%, or 58 respondents) had taken an introductory principles of marketing course. The survey questions were as follows:

I. Demographic information
The following questions were asked to classify the demographics of the respondents:
1.   What year did or do you expect to graduate from college?
2.   Did you enroll and complete a course entitled Principles of Marketing?
3.   What is your gender?
4.   What is your major or specialization?

II. Grading approaches
5.   As an individual presenter, if you were delivering a 30 minute presentation to your class, do you believe you should receive one grade for your oral presentation and a separate grade for the written portion of that presentation? If no, explain.
6.   If you were completing an individual term project, and that project required you to deliver a thirty-minute oral presentation to the class on that term project, what do you believe should be the weight of the oral presentation to your final grade in the course? (0 percent, 1%-5%, 6%-10%, 11%-15%, 16%-20%, 21%-25%, 26%-30%, or other)
7.   As a team presenter, if your team were delivering one thirty-minute presentation to your class, do you believe your team should receive one-grade for your oral presentation and a separate grade for the written portion of the presentation? If no, explain:
8.   If you were completing a team term project, and that project required that you deliver a thirty-minute oral presentation to the class, what do you believe should be the weight of the oral presentation to your final grade in the course? (0 percent, 1%-5%, 6%-10%, 11%-15%, 16%-20%, 21%-25%, 26%-30%, or other)

9.   Please rate the following grading approaches as Poor, Average, Good, or Excellent:
  i.   Graded solely by the professor, using criteria from an evaluation form distributed prior to preparing and presenting the oral presentation.
  ii.   Graded partially by peer evaluations from each student attending the oral presentation, where attendees complete an evaluation form and submit to instructor.
  iii. Graded partially by peer evaluations from team members rating each team member's level of participation in preparing and presenting the oral presentation.

III. Assessment of individual competencies
10.   How confident are you in your ability to do the following (No confidence, Limited confidence, Moderately confident, Very confident)
  i.   speak clearly?
  ii.   match your style and content to suit the audience?
  iii.   effective use of time?
  iv.   effective use of transitioning to different topics or ideas in your presentation?
  v.   organize ideas and explain them clearly?
  vi.   use visual aids effectively, e.g. PowerPoint?
  vii.   use body language effectively?
  viii. respond to questions from your audience?
  ix.   dress appropriately (professional attire) to suit the audience?
  x.   ability to handle the media equipment for your presentation, projector, microphone, laptop, visual aids, etc.
  xi.   deal with speaking anxiety before and during your presentation?

IV. Attitudes toward oral presentations
11.   Rank the importance of each of the following five categories from 1 to 5: Preparation, Organization, Content, Presentation, and Oral Skills
12.   Please explain any bad experiences you have had as a class presenter.
13.   How would you describe the top two personal characteristics of an excellent oral presentation?
14.   Do you believe delivering oral presentations into the classroom enhances your college experiences and educational goals?
15.   Do you believe delivering oral presentations into the classroom improves your future professional skills?

Results from the survey questions listed above were then coded as followed for further analysis:

- Major and specialization values were grouped into one of the following overall categories: Business, Education, Social Science, Science, Liberal Arts and Other.
- A content analysis was performed on responses to questions 11 and 12. Answers for question 11 were grouped into one of the following categories: Team issues, Lack of preparation, Speaking anxiety, Audience reaction, and Logistical issues, while answers for question 12 were grouped into one of the following categories: Interest, Knowledge, Confidence, Strength of Topic, and Presentation Skills.
- Other survey responses were coded as quantitative values as specified by respondents.

Responses to these questions were compiled, and this data was then analyzed for both aggregate responses and the relationship of these responses to demographics factors such as gender and declared major. Except as noted below, the vast majority of these responses showed little variation with demographic factors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study underscored the importance of oral presentations in the opinions of students themselves, while at the same time revealing a number of findings that challenge traditional thinking about the use of these presentations in marketing education. Some of the key findings include the following:

1. Students have substantial ambivalence about team presentations and peer assessment. In an ideal world, the college classroom may appear to be a promising laboratory for participatory approaches to both project work and

assessment – however, this view is not widely shared among students themselves. In a content analysis of qualitative responses about bad experiences with oral presentations, one of the most common was being part of a presentation team, cited by nearly a quarter of respondents (24.5%) as shown in Figure 1. Common concerns included team members not sharing the workload equally, being out of touch, or impacting the final presentation with poor presentation skills. As one student noted, "My grade was lowered once because of my partner not being a good presenter. In almost every group project I've done, there are always students who do a majority of the work and other members who don't do nearly enough." While not shown in this figure, this was also one area where a higher percentage of students with a core major of business shared team concerns (29.1% of respondents) versus other majors (17.9% of respondents).

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

This ambivalence extends to peer assessment, both in terms of student audience reactions and grading issues. In the former case, Figure 1 also shows that 18.5% of respondents cite audience reactions as a bad experience in oral presentations. The majority of these cite inattention as their main concern, however some speak of fellow students openly trying to disrupt their presentation, and more than one notes other students making fun of their accent. This was also one of few survey areas where there were substantive differences based on gender, with nearly twice the percentage of female students (26.7% versus 14.1% of males) highlighting audience reactions as their worst experience.

These concerns are also reflected in attitudes towards the grading oral presentations, as shown in Figure 2. A majority of those responding rate grading solely by professor from good to excellent (38 out of 65 responses), while a majority rated the addition of grading input by peer audiences as average to good (72 out of 93 responses), and grading input from participation ratings by team members as poor to average (60 out of 92 responses). Students overwhelmingly preferred that a separate grade be given for oral versus written projects (90.4% of responses for both individual and team projects), with a median preferred weighting (i.e. percentage of total grade) of 16-20% for individual projects and 21-25% for team projects.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

2. There is a considerable gap between how students assess their own presentation skill needs versus how they evaluate other presentations. Simply put, the traits that students value the most in other presentations involve pedagogical competencies such as presentation skills and capturing audience interest, yet when they look in the mirror to rate their own most important skills, content and organization issues are rated far over these skills. When asked to quantitatively describe the top characteristics of an excellent oral presentation, an overwhelming majority of students gave their highest rating to platform skills such as creating audience interest (28.7% of responses), showing confidence (25.5%), and presentation skills (23.4%). Conversely, Figures 3 and 4 show that when asked to rate the importance of their own oral presentation skills, students rated content (28 out of 94 responses), preparation (19) and organization (14) the highest, while only one respondent rated presentation skills the highest, and none rated oral skills the highest – in fact, 19% of respondents rated oral skills as their lowest priority.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

3. Students place a high value on the importance of oral presentations, yet disclose considerable anxiety about speaking. Respondents almost universally rated oral presentations as being important to both their academic experience (94.7%, or 89 out of 94) and their future careers (98.9%, or 93 out of 94). At the same time, delivering these presentations remains a source of anxiety for many students. Among responses rating their own competencies for oral presentations, control of speaking anxiety was the lowest rated area, with an average rating of 2.85 out of 4.0 across all respondents, as shown in Figure 5. In general, students rated procedural competencies such as dress (3.83), use of visual aids (3.53), and use of audio/visual equipment (3.27) the highest, while pedagogical skills such as body language (3.0), managing time (3.09), and speaking clearly (3.13) were rated the lowest. These results showed a very similar variation across both gender and declared major.

FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

In the content analysis of bad speaking experiences discussed earlier in Figure 1, a plurality of respondents also identified their own anxieties (24.5% of respondents) as being their worst experience, together with the aforementioned concerns with audience reactions and team issues.

These findings paint a clear picture of students who on one hand see great value in developing good oral presentation skills as part of one's marketing education, and on the other hand lack perception regarding the basic skills and competencies that will make these efforts successful in both academia and their future careers. Moreover, these results point to legitimate concerns regarding the differences in both participation levels and assessment skills among their fellow students. Finally, the fear of public speaking – commonly rated as our worst fear – remains an impediment for many students in leveraging oral presentations as a tool to enhance their personal skills and marketability.

SUMMARY

Taken in sum total, these survey results represent a challenge to marketing educators who wish to give their students more real-world exposure in the form of oral presentations, particularly when they are part of a team project. Making these experiences truly effective in the future will require creative thought in a number of areas, including:

- How do we accurately assess the value of individual contributions within a team presentation? Moreover, how can we turn team projects into effective learning experiences for each of the participants involved?
- How can we educate students themselves to be effective and respectful consumers of oral presentations, and successfully help assess and coach such presentations as their peers develop their own presentation skills?
- What steps need to be taken to improve the platform and pedagogical skills of student presenters? More important, how can we teach students what speaking and presentation competencies are valued by the business world in their careers?
- How can we effectively address common student fears of speaking in public, particularly in front of their peers?

Further areas for research may include surveying larger sample sizes, addressing a more general student population, and surveying a larger number of males to further examine gender effects. Survey methodologies such as class-based surveys may also reveal further data beyond students who self-select to respond to an independent survey such as this one. Areas for further investigation such as these can potentially serve as a basis for turning oral presentations into a tool for personal growth and development among marketing students, and in turn add depth and value to their overall educational experience.

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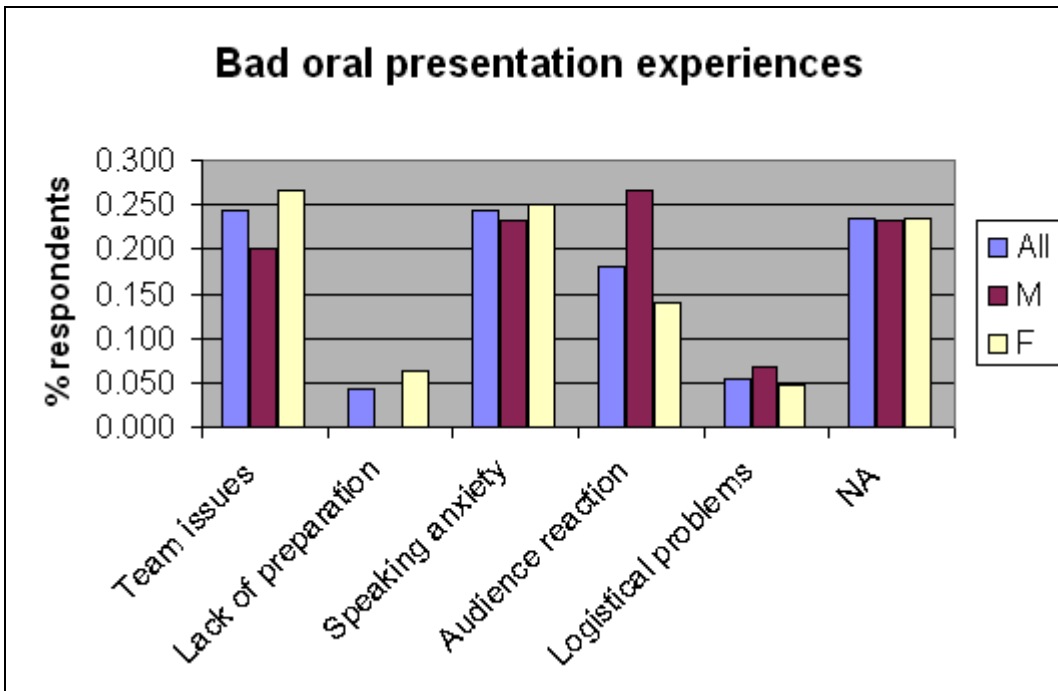
Figure 1. Bad student experiences with oral presentations, as percentages of respondents, for all students and by gender.
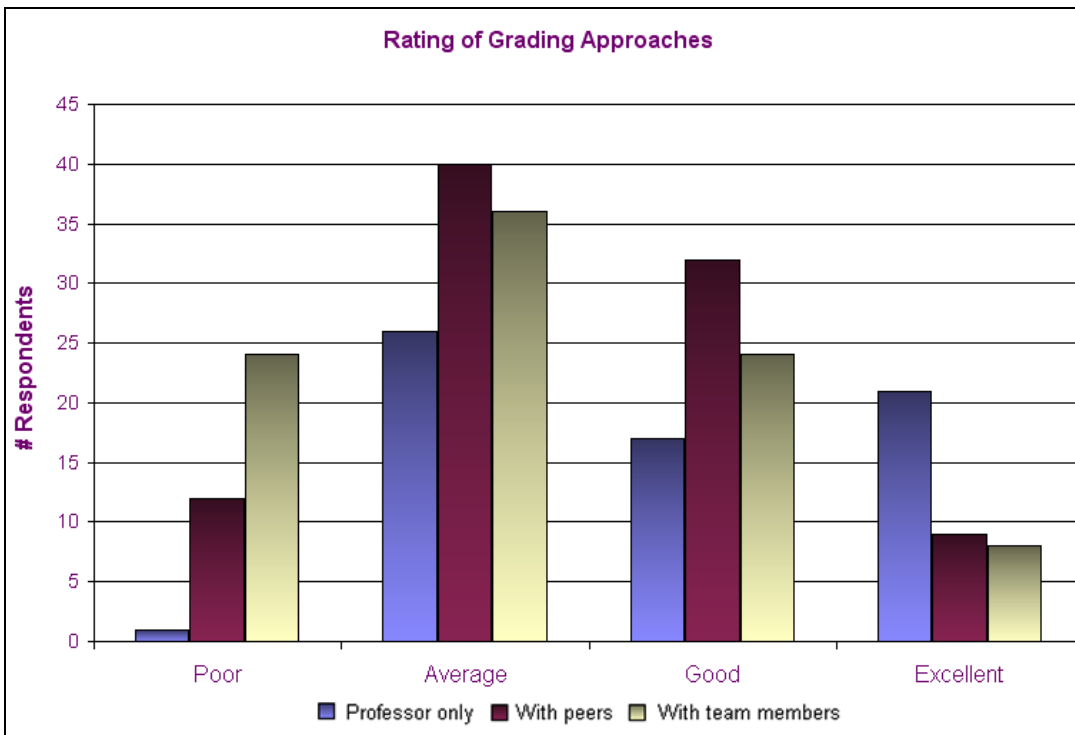

Figure 2. Student ratings of grading approaches for oral presentations.
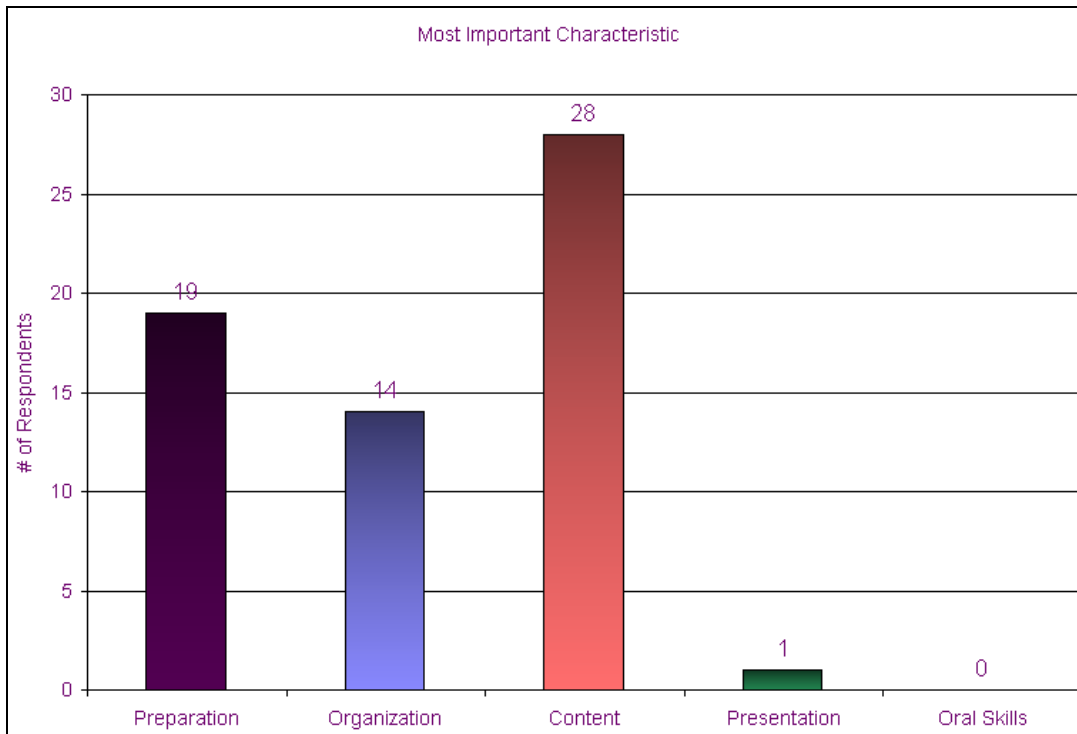
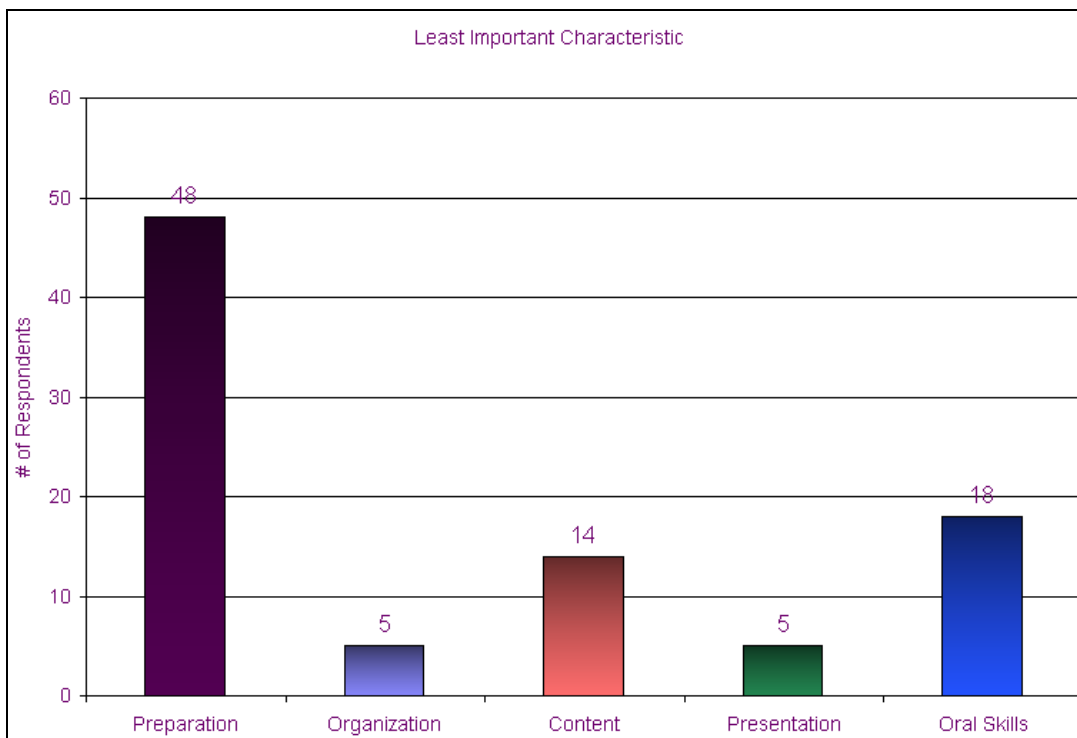**Figure 3. Factors rated most important by students for oral presentations.**

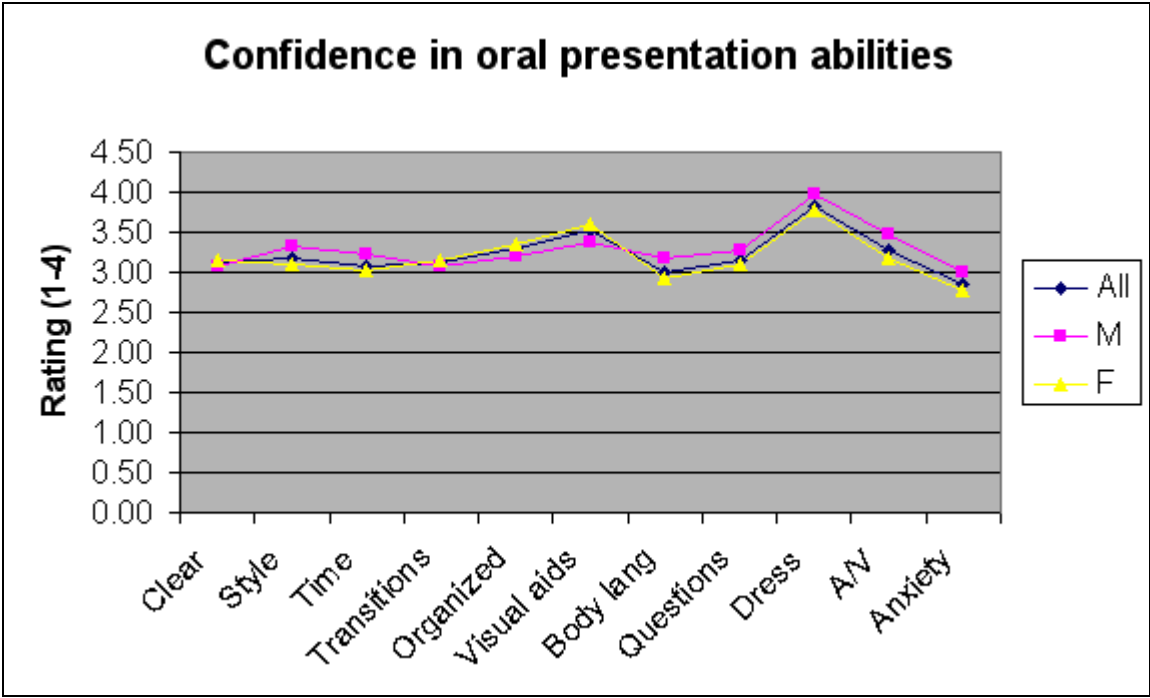**Figure 4. Factors rated least important by students for oral presentations.**

Figure 5. Ratings of student confidence levels in specific competencies for oral presentations.