

## Oral Communication July 2008

### Definition

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Oral communication skills are a set of abilities enabling individuals to become confident and competent speakers/communicators by the time they graduate. Rather than thinking of oral communication skills as the ability for a student to make a speech, it is important to consider both informal and formal uses of communication within a situation.

### Rationale

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Oral communication skills equip students to effectively comprehend, critique, and analyze information, communicate clearly and persuasively, and express ideas.

Oral communication is one of the intellectual and practical skills outlined in AAC&U's Essential Learning Outcomes.

Intellectual and practical skills were identified as one of the areas of strategic interest and were defined by President Byrd as including three elements:

- “The ability to think critically
- *The ability to communicate effectively*
- The ability to collaborate and work as a member of a team” (emphasis added)

([http://www.simpson.edu/plan/committees/action/IPS\\_finalreport.pdf](http://www.simpson.edu/plan/committees/action/IPS_finalreport.pdf)).

Communicating effectively is necessary both for critical thinking and for working as a member of a team.

### Criteria for Approving Proposals

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In order for a course to be designated as an oral communication course, the course needs to include:

- explicit instruction in effective oral communication
- provide opportunities for students to practice oral communication skills
- provide feedback to students in order to help students develop their oral communication skills
- assess the extent to which students can meet the learning outcomes identified below

Learning Outcomes:

The student who is a proficient oral communicator in a formal communication situation (e.g., presentation of research material, persuasive speech; debate) can:

- Demonstrate the basic principles for organizing ideas appropriately for accomplishing informative and persuasive communication objectives;
- Demonstrate critical thinking skills when examining arguments, sources, processes, etc.;
- Locate, use, and correctly cite appropriate evidence to support their claims;
- Communicate effectively in a variety of rhetorical situations.

A student should also be able to communicate successfully in more informal situations (e.g. class discussions, one-on-one conversations). In informal communication situations a student who is a proficient communicator can:

- Articulate thoughtfully their perspective/understanding of the topic;
- Listen carefully to others in the conversation;
- Synthesize the different ideas presented in the conversation.

### **Source Information on Similar Requirements at other Good Schools**

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Described below are different ways other institutions have integrated oral communication into their curriculums.

**The University of Wisconsin – Madison** includes written and oral communication as a part of the general education program. Faculty can seek to have their courses designated as Comm-A or Comm-B courses. Comm-B courses emphasize the oral communication component. The UW Writing Across the Curriculum website offers advice on how to incorporate oral communication activities into the classroom.

#### High Degree of Formality and Out-of-Class Preparation

- Debate
- Trial
- Presentation of research results

#### Significant Degree of Formality and Out-of-Class Preparation

- Student- or group-led discussions on readings, writings, or other course material
- Role-play
- Performance

#### Relatively Small Degree of Formality and Little Out-of-Class Preparation

- Peer-review groups in which students share drafts and give each other oral feedback
- Small-group discussion
- "Work-in-progress" presentations (1-2 minutes) to present paper topics, new ideas, or interesting research to the entire class
- "Open-mike" readings of finished work to share and to celebrate work accomplished

#### Almost No Formality or Out-of-Class Preparation

- Participation in class discussion
- Sharing journals or informal writing in class

[http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC/page.jsp?id=73&c\\_type=category&c\\_id=50](http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC/page.jsp?id=73&c_type=category&c_id=50)

**St. Olaf** includes an oral communication (ORC) distinction as a part of the general education requirements. An oral communication course is one “that incorporates specific instruction, practice, and feedback to develop oral communication competence and confidence.”

#### Guidelines

1. An oral communication course must provide explicit instruction in effective oral communication through assigned readings, lectures, class discussions, and/or other instructional features of the course.

2. An oral communication course must emphasize speaking and listening as principal and integral means of learning. The course must provide several opportunities for students to practice their oral skills in course assignments, and it must provide students with specific feedback on the development of these skills.
3. Oral communication courses may emphasize any of the modes of communication, including presentations, small group debates or discussions, and/or one-on-one communication.

<http://www.stolaf.edu/committees/gec/genedrequirements/oralcommunication.html>)

**Southern Illinois University Carbondale** has an extensive Communication Across the Curriculum program. The program views oral communication as a process/activity that aids student learning. Improving student's communication skills also improves their critical thinking skills.

“The act of communicating helps people understand the world in which they find themselves. When a person must convey information to another, he or she must describe the subject, define the subject, classify the subject, and explain the subject's importance. These acts of description, definition, classification, and explanation improve apprehension and the application of knowledge. Aristotle, whose scientific investigations are the model for our curriculum, believed that human comprehension demanded communicative abilities. Aristotle believed that humans know *in language*, J. H. Randall explains. Humans understand "by describing things in words, by making statements about things, by reasoning from one fact to another, by employing discourse" (*Aristotle* 6).

“The connection between apprehension and communication is central to CAC programs. As Bean explains (drawing upon the work of John Dewey and Michael Polanyi), problems present natural and healthy motivations for living; they stimulate growth (even in the most basic forms of life). And communication is a process of performing critical thinking and conveying the product of that thought (*Engaging Ideas* 2-3). Courses that are part of a CAC program should have, then, components that emphasize writing and speaking as modes of knowledge acquisition and production.

“Consequently, limiting writing to an auxiliary part of a course limits the potential of a course. When writing and speaking are limited to mere modes of conveyance, all that an instructor can ask about communicative acts is whether they are clear, Bean explains (3). But if communication is accepted as a mode of learning and discovery—an epistemic activity—then an instructor can ask if communicative acts are interesting . . . if they evidence a critical mind at work . . . if they attempt to connect with an audience and an audience's ideas with the new thoughts. Communicative acts become a way to foster intellectual growth associated with a particular course's material.

“To help students reason about course material, you can employ communicating-to-learn strategies, writing and speaking assignments that emphasize the connection between communication and cognition. These activities do not require significant rhetorical guidance: Students should be able to employ these strategies adeptly after minimal instruction. And the assignments do not require extensive commentary; you might not grade them. Yet, these strategies will foster thinking about course material in new ways *and* exercise communicative faculties that more complex forms of communication demand. The communicating-to-learn strategies will give students an opportunity to work with course material and develop critical understanding of the material. This work does not have to have the appearance of "busy work."

Students could be asked to engage in rhetorical exercises that they will need to use in the future—both in their schoolwork and in their careers.”

(<http://www.siu.edu/departments/cac/guidethree.htm>)

## Teaching Resources

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**Humboldt State University** has implemented a CAC program. “CAC is a new, campus-wide curricular and professional development program at HSU designed to provide support for faculty interested in integrating written and oral communication into their courses and fostering CAC across the disciplines. CAC expands the writing across the curriculum (WAC) program to include oral communication as well.”

One of the resources on the HSU website is “Building Oral and Written Communication into Your Classroom” This handout was developed by The University of Delaware Writing Center.

“Writing and speaking activities offer students the opportunity to engage with course materials and develop both communication and critical thinking skills. As an expert in your discipline, you can help students develop both disciplinary literacy and critical thinking through regular high and low stakes writing and speaking activities. As John Bean notes, “The use of writing and critical thinking activities to promote learning does not happen through serendipity. Teachers must plan for it and foster it throughout the course” (p. 1). (Bean’s *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* informs many of the ideas presented in this handout and represents a terrific resource for university faculty.)”

“**Writing and speaking reflect both process and product.** Importantly, the best instruction in communication demands attention to both process and product: how to think through a problem or assignment methodically and how to express the results of that critical thinking in clear communication. As Bean notes, “Writing instruction goes sour whenever writing is conceived as primarily a communication skill, rather than as a process and product of critical thought” (p. 3). The same applies to oral communication.”

([http://www.humboldt.edu/~ugst/wac/guidelines\\_comm.html](http://www.humboldt.edu/~ugst/wac/guidelines_comm.html))

The University of Delaware version of this page, along with a variety of other helpful resources, can be found at

<http://www.english.udel.edu/wc/faculty/tipsheets/index.html>.

## Assessment Resources

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<http://www.natcom.org/Instruction/assessment/Assessment/CriteriaAssessment.htm>

This website describes the assessment criteria recommended by the National Communication Association.

<http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/pdfRubrics/oralassess.PDF>

This PDF document contains rubrics for assessing formal presentations. It includes verbal effectiveness, nonverbal effectiveness, appropriateness, and responsiveness.

[www.eng.auburn.edu/department/che/doc/Oral%20Communication%20Assessment%20Rubric.doc](http://www.eng.auburn.edu/department/che/doc/Oral%20Communication%20Assessment%20Rubric.doc)

This word document contains a rubric for assigning points to oral presentations. It comes from the Department of Chemical Engineering at Auburn University.

<http://openedpractices.org/files/Oral%20Comm%20Alverno.pdf>

This PDF document contains the rubric used at Alverno College for assessing formal presentations. The 10 specific skills include speaking on one's feet, establishing and maintaining context, verbal expression, effective delivery, appropriate conventions, purposeful structure, support for a position/development of an idea, creation and use of media, appropriate context, and self-assessment.

## **Examples of Classes**

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## **Staffing and Costs**

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## **Implementation Challenges**

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The subcommittee discussed several challenges associated with implementing an oral communication requirement.

1. Faculty may prefer to teach either formal presentation skills or informal presentation skills rather than both sets of skills. Courses could thus be “stamped” OCF (oral communication – formal) or OCI (oral communication – informal), but that would increase the number of designations associated with courses and increase the number of requirements students need to fulfill.
2. The AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes states that the intellectual and practical skills, including oral communication, should be “*Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance.*” Although the subcommittee agreed that this was important, they were hesitant to recommend requiring students to take multiple courses to fulfill any one requirement.
3. Many faculty members may not feel comfortable in their ability to teach oral communication skills. Faculty development opportunities would be needed.