

How to Give Winning Briefings

*Become an outstanding briefer.
These concise steps tell you how.*

John A. Kline, PhD

Briefings are the most common kind of oral presentation in both military and business settings. Sometimes their purpose is to inform—to tell listeners about a mission, project, operation, or concept. At other times, briefings are used to train listeners so they can perform a procedure or carry out instructions. Briefings also can advocate or seek to persuade listeners to accept a certain solution or way of doing things. “The ABCs of briefing help us remember that a briefing should always be Accurate, Brief, and Clear.”¹

The good news is almost anyone can become an outstanding briefer; the disturbing news is most never do. What is the biggest cause of briefing failure? Briefers forget that effective communication is always receiver-centered. It’s not about what you want to tell your listeners; rather, it’s about what you want them to think, feel, or do. Keeping that thought in mind, here is how to give winning briefings—ones that communicate and get desired results.

ORGANIZE THE BRIEFING

Clear, logical organization is vital to effective briefing, for it serves as the framework or skeleton for effective communication. Good organization for a briefing has three parts: the beginning, the body, and the ending.

The Beginning

The beginning of a briefing is where you “tell them what you are going to tell them.” Most briefings have a standard beginning. For example, if I were briefing on how to give winning briefings, I most likely would begin by stating my name, title, subject, and main points of the briefing: “Good morning, I’m Dr. John Kline, director of the Institute for Leadership Development at Troy University. Today I will brief you on how to give winning briefings. More specifically, we will look at three things: how to organize a briefing, how to support a briefing, and how to deliver a briefing.” It is at this point, if applicable, where I would announce the classification of the briefing (confidential, secret, etc.).

The Body

The body of the briefing is where you “tell them.” Before you decide on the points you will present in the body, write an objective to guide your preparation. Your objective tells the specific response (or outcome) you want from your audience. Frame your objective this way: “The objective of this briefing is for each listener to . . .” Beginning your objective with this statement helps you focus on the response you hope to achieve from your listeners. It keeps you receiver-centered. For example, the objective of this article is for each reader to know how to give winning briefings. While my task is to tell how to give winning briefings, my objective is for each reader to be able to give them.

Next, choose main points that will enable you to meet your objective. For briefings, main points most often are

organized chronologically (before/during/after), spatially (north/south/east/west), cause-effect (increased operating tempo/equipment breakdowns), problem-solution (late payments/way to correct the problem), pro-con (stay the course/withdraw), or topically (organize/support/deliver). Notice that even though I used a topical organization for this article, I am addressing the main points in a specified order—one that helps me present the information and, above all, one that helps readers understand and retain the information for their use. Notice also that the main points of organize/support/deliver clearly support my audience-centered objective: for each reader to know how to give winning briefings. It’s what you need to do to conduct an effective briefing.

The Ending

The ending of the briefing is where you “tell them what you told them.” Most briefings have a standard ending. To end a briefing on how to give winning briefings, I might say: “Today I’ve discussed how to give winning briefings. We looked at three things: how to organize a briefing, how to support a briefing, and how to deliver a briefing.” This is followed by a closing statement such as: “Thank you for listening; this concludes my briefing. Are there any (further) questions?” (Note: If you took questions during the briefing, then clarify by adding the word “further.”)

SUPPORT THE BRIEFING

While clear, logical organization provides an effective skeleton for the briefing, supporting material puts flesh on the bones. Supporting material may be either verbal or visual but, in either case, make certain this material fits both the content and the audience. A briefing is not the place to tell a cute story or use a fancy visual prop or slide that calls attention to it-

self. Since briefings are by definition brief, support generally is limited to data carefully selected to accomplish the need to know.

Verbal Support

Each of the standard forms of verbal support is important. *Definitions* are often needed to explain new or unfamiliar terms or acronyms. *Examples* provide specific or concrete instances that help clarify general or abstract ideas. *Comparisons and contrasts* help audiences more readily grasp new ideas. *Statistics and testimony (or quotations)* from expert and trustworthy sources supply factual data and proof for the points you are making. Choose support that fits your audience. Especially use examples and comparisons that are familiar or easily understood.

Visual Support

Somebody once said a picture is worth a thousand words. Visual aids can dramatize, amplify, or clarify the points you are trying to get across to your audience. Often, you will use PowerPoint slides to enhance your briefings. But whatever visual support you use, keep a few things in mind. Make sure your visuals are relevant, simple, and large enough to be seen by your audience. And don’t let your visuals draw your attention or the attention of the audience away from the message.²

DELIVER THE BRIEFING

Although preparing the briefing can be laborious, delivery is the most difficult part for many people—but it needn’t be. If you know your subject and have prepared well, then presenting briefings can be an exhilarating experience. The secret is to be well organized, have the right supporting information, and then practice, practice, practice—giving attention to several important factors of delivery.

Method

While some briefings are read—such as mission briefings that must be in sync with slides and/or video clips—most briefings should be delivered in an extemporaneous manner. Plan your briefings idea by idea rather than word by word. Then you need only to carry a brief outline or a few notes to the lectern when you speak. This method will require that you prepare carefully, yet it will enable you to adjust to your audience and to sound more spontaneous and conversational.

Eye Contact

Eye contact is one of the most important tools at a briefer's disposal. Nothing enhances delivery more than effective eye contact with the audience. To achieve genuine eye contact, you must do more than merely look in the direction of the audience. The old advice of looking over the tops of your listeners' heads or attempting to look at all parts of the audience systematically simply does not describe effective eye contact. You should look directly at people, most likely giving more attention to the senior-ranking person(s) in the audience but attempting to include all listeners. Effective eye contact—the kind where you look at listeners as you would during a conversation with one or two people—will keep the audience's interest, allow you to adjust to nonverbal feedback, and make you appear more credible to your listeners.

Body Movement

In many speaking situations, persons are advised to get out from behind the lectern and move around. With briefings, however, this often is not possible; briefings typically are presented from behind a lectern. If you are using a lectern, be careful not to lean or rock on it or sway out of the range of the microphone (if you are using one). If possible, adjust the lectern to a comfortable height—one that allows you to place your hands comfortably on the surface to handle your notes or to gesture effectively.

Gestures

Use them. The hands, arms, shoulders, head, and face can help to reinforce what

you are saying. Although gestures can be perfected with practice, they will be most effective if you make a conscious effort to have them appear natural and spontaneous rather than planned. If possible, video-record one of your briefings so you can observe yourself and decide which gestures are effective and whether they reinforce the spoken message. And remember, a comfortable smile (not a silly grin or nervous laughter) helps most briefings, warms your audience to your presentation, and makes you appear more confident and relaxed.

Voice

Three vocal characteristics are important. The first is quality. Although you should strive to produce a pleasing tone and attempt to use your voice to its best advantage, rest easy in knowing that some of the very finest briefers have only average voices.

The second is understandability. Your audience must be able to understand you. Give special attention to articulation (how you form sounds), pronunciation (how you say words), and avoidance of stock expressions (such as “okay” or vocalized pauses such as “uh,” “um,” or “and uh”). Above all, avoid poor grammar; it affects understandability and reflects negatively on you and your message.

The third characteristic is variety. Effective briefers vary the rate, volume, force, pitch, and emphasis. As with everything else, consider your audience. Your primary task is not to deliver information; it is to help the audience understand.

Transitions

One mark of effective delivery is how well the parts are tied together. Effective transitions aid listening, provide a logical flow, and add a professional touch. In articles, such as the one you are now reading, paragraphs, bold print, italics, or space between sections lets you know you are transitioning from one point to another. Effective briefers do the same thing


with the words they use and the way they say them.

Suppose, while briefing on how to give winning briefings, I want to transition from the first point (organize the briefing) to the second point (support the briefing). I might say,

“Not only is it important to organize our points effectively, it also is important to choose the right information to support the points we are making.”

Notice how I led you from one point to another. Note also that, in this article, I provided a transition as I introduced each of the three main points: organization, support, and delivery. Effective briefers provide helpful transitions through the words they say and the way they say them. They provide necessary verbal material, and they punctuate ideas with their voices. They do this between the beginning and the body, the body and the ending, between main points, from main points to sub points and even between sub points. Effective transitions help your listeners understand and add polish and professionalism to your briefing.

CONCLUSION

Start with a receiver-focused objective, choose main points that enable you to meet your objective, and add supporting material that helps you communicate your points. And then, practice, practice, practice while giving special attention to delivery. Follow these points and you'll be ready to give that winning briefing—the one that communicates and gets the desired results. 

ENDNOTES

¹John A. Kline, *Speaking Effectively: Achieving Excellence in Presentations*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education Incorporated, 2004, p. 15.

²For more suggestions see “Sudden (Graphic) Death,” Dr. John A. Kline, *Armed Forces Comptroller*, Winter 2005, p. 28.

