

"May I Have Your Attention?": Exordial Techniques in Informative Oral Presentations

Bas A. Andeweg

Delft University of Technology, Delft, The Netherlands

Jaap C. de Jong

Delft University of Technology, Delft, The Netherlands

Hans Hoeken

Nijmegen University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

An introduction, even a short one, makes audiences more willing to listen to a speech, think more highly of the speaker, and understand a speech better than when no introduction is given. Two experiments at Delft University of Technology support this conclusion. Subjects viewed videotapes of professional presentations on the topic of Sick Building Syndrome. In one experiment, subjects rated the effectiveness of three introductory or "exordial" techniques in gaining audience attention: an anecdote, an ethical appeal, and a "your problem" approach. Results indicate that audiences do respond to exordial techniques, and in a predictable manner. In the second experiment, two speeches with anecdotal openers were tested against one without any introduction. The anecdotes led to significantly higher ratings of the presentation's comprehensibility and interest, as well as the speaker's credibility. The presence of an anecdote also resulted in higher retention scores. Oddly enough, the *relevance* of the anecdote did not seem to make a difference in the ratings.

There must be fifty ways to start a presentation. Anecdote, joke, quotation, question—communications professors give their students lists and examples to help them achieve the job of getting the attention of their audience. And that job is crucial. It is no secret that people listen selectively. If the audience finds the speaker, the subject, or the treatment of the subject uninteresting or unprofessional—a judgement usually made within a minute

(Harms)—the audience is less receptive to the speaker's message. Missing important parts can render a presentation incomprehensible. Whereas a *reader* can re-read a passage that is difficult to comprehend, a *listener* does not have such a replay opportunity. Therefore, getting the audience's attention is crucial.

Classical rhetorical theory, folk wisdom, and trial-and-error provide the major sources of advice about what to do in the first minute or two of a presentation. Several researchers have addressed the effects of *ethos*, or the credibility of the speaker (see, for example, McCroskey and Young; Dempsey and Reinsch; Gruner; Beason). Less research attention has been paid, however, to strategies for getting the audience's attention and encouraging their willingness to listen.

This article presents the results of a new study conducted at the Delft University of Technology that addresses that research need. The study identified various *exordial* or introductory techniques and aimed to answer the following question: Is one technique clearly better than another in rendering the audience more willing to listen, establishing the credibility of the speaker, and helping the audience better understand the content of the talk that follows? The results of our study should interest faculty members who teach public speaking as well as anyone who has to give an oral presentation, and thus must choose an appropriate and effective introduction. Before discussing the two experiments we conducted to answer this research question, let's review three of the best known exordial techniques.

Exordial Functions and Techniques

Current advice about introductions does not differ greatly from advice given in classical antiquity. For example, Osborn and Osborn's *Public Speaking* presents three functions: capturing attention, establishing your credibility, and previewing your topic. Verderber's *The Challenge of Effective Speaking* counts four functions: getting attention, setting a tone, creating a bond of good will, and leading into content. These and other guidebooks all closely resemble the triad developed by the Sophists and adopted by Cicero: *attentum*, *benivolem*, and *docilem facere* (Cicero 42; McCroskey 221-22):

- *attentum*: gaining the attention and willingness of the audience for the subject
- *benivolem*: establishing the speaker's credibility
- *docilem*: increasing the ability to listen (that is, by giving information and previewing)

To fulfill those functions, advice books on public speaking describe diverse exordial techniques. James McCroskey describes sixteen ways of starting. Erik van der Spek's *De Eerste Klap, 20 Beproeefde*

Technieken (The First Blow: Twenty Tried and True Techniques), published in The Netherlands, gives twenty techniques as the title suggests. The techniques vary from providing an anecdote, simile, quotation, striking fact or figure, or joke to asking a question and establishing credibility. Seasoned teachers and speakers have their own stock of techniques and examples.

In our research, we concentrated on three techniques featured in the how-to literature and used widely in technical and business settings. While each is capable of variations, we tried to define them in ways that allowed us to distinguish their different effects.

Anecdote

An anecdote opener, as we defined it, is a short story that introduces the subject in a lively and imaginative way. It is not a story about the speaker or in which the speaker plays the main character. Instead, the story focuses on the subject matter and describes an incident or event that gets the attention of the audience. The relationship of the audience or the speaker towards the subject is less important than the details of the story itself.

An anecdote is versatile. Its primary purpose may be to captivate the audience. It may aim to entertain and educate the audience by depicting abstract problems in human terms. It may encapsulate the essence of the whole speech. While it is thus usable in most settings, some audiences may think it a detour around the main speech, especially in situations where listeners are under a great amount of stress. An anecdotal opening would not be appropriate, for example, in a presentation to people whose jobs are challenged or whose families are threatened. But in normal conferences or instructional settings it is a valuable technique.

Ethical Appeal

The ethical appeal consists of a short description of the qualities of the speaker or his or her company. The description emphasizes expertise and experience in the subject of the presentation. The speaker also uses technical jargon to further enhance an image of professionalism. With this appeal, the focus is on the speaker; the subject and the listeners are less important.

This technique seems especially valuable when the audience does not know the speaker well. The speaker thus needs to take explicit steps in establishing authority so that the audience will believe the analysis to be presented, or accept the validity of the speaker's perspective, or follow the advice that will be given. The ethical appeal is much used in situations where it is important for the speaker's professionalism to be clear.

“Your Problem” Approach

A third technique is to introduce the subject as a problem the listeners are likely to face. The focus is on the listeners, and the subject is presented in light of its relevance directly to them. The speaker's implied role in giving the presentation is that of problem solver.

Like an anecdotal opener, the “your problem” approach has wide applicability. Unlike the anecdote, it is appropriate in stressful situations when the audience would not appreciate digressions but wants an introduction to come directly to the point. It is a direct way to involve the audience by relating the topic to their lives. The problem must be immediately recognizable.

We conducted two experiments to test the effectiveness of each of these exordial techniques. The subjects for both were students at the Delft University of Technology. The first experiment investigated the relative merits of each technique in gaining the audience's attention and willingness to listen. The second tested the effects of each technique on the audience's retention of important information. In that experiment, we showed different groups of subjects a whole speech on videotape. Each group saw a presentation beginning with a different exordial technique. We then asked their opinion about it after the presentation and tested the correlation between different techniques and the audience's ability to retain information from the presentation. The following sections describe the two experiments.

Experiment One: Comparing the Three Techniques

The goal of the first experiment was to compare the effects of the three exordial techniques on listeners. We sought to find out if they differed in their ability to gain the audience's willingness to listen, to establish the speaker's credibility, and to encourage comprehension. Listeners can only understand something they are willing to at least pay some attention to.

Method

We composed three introductions, one for each technique, on the same topic: Sick Building Syndrome (SBS) (see Appendix A and Kurvers et al.). The topic was determined to be of interest to the test group and not too well known. We then asked the subjects to complete a questionnaire about what they had seen.

The Introductions

Each introduction consisted of two parts: first, a variable part including the exordial technique (see Appendices A1, A2, and A3), and next, a standard part that stated the goal and previewed the whole presentation (Appendix A5). In a small pretest, the written introductions were presented to a panel of four experts, professors in public speaking. These expert evaluations resulted in minor stylistic changes; for example, some sentences were shortened and some words were made more neutral. The experts judged the three final texts as standard in kind; that is, not deviating from each other in content and realistic in detail; that is, they were not extremely boring or interesting, relevant or irrelevant, persuasive or dissuasive. They did vary some in style: choice of words, length of sentence, structure, and length of text.

An experienced scholar not known to the subjects videotaped the three introductions. He read some of the introduction and spoke some of it with eye contact. His intonation was rather lively but without exaggeration. In a pretest of the tape, the panel of experts found that the three presentations did not differ in terms of voice, gestures, and eye contact. The average length of each the introductions was 1.4 minutes.

Questionnaire

To establish whether the three openings resulted in different effects, a multi-part questionnaire was developed. The first part asked respondents to characterize their knowledge and interest in the topic of SBS. The second part presented a series of fifteen statements on the presentation. Listeners had to indicate on a five-point Likert scale whether they agreed with the statement. The statements concerned aspects of willingness to listen, and the credibility and comprehensibility of the introduction and the speaker, that is:

- I think the introduction is comprehensible.
- I think the introduction is fascinating.
- The introduction made me curious about the rest of the presentation.
- The speaker is trustworthy.

Subjects

The subjects were students at the Delft University of Technology. The students came from different departments (varying from aerospace engineering to information technology to civil engineering), and had an average age of 22 years. The students [N=278] were enrolled in a course in public speaking. They rated their knowledge about SBS as quite little (2.2 on a five-point scale). They expected the topic to be interesting (3.49) and rather useful for their future profession (3.2).

Test Procedure

The videotapes were shown during the second meeting of the class. The first meeting was introductory and did not cover any theory or practice on introduction techniques. The seven professors who acted as experimenters received written instructions about their tasks. They clarified the context of the presentation to the students as follows: The presentation would be one of the lectures at a symposium about aspects of the new law on working conditions (the Dutch *Arbeidsomstandigheden-wet: ARBO-wet*). All three openings were presented to every subject in six different sequences to prevent possible sequence effects. Directly after each opening the students filled in the questionnaire. Afterwards, the professors used the tape to instruct their students about introductions.

Results

Figure 1 shows the main differences among the three introductions for each dimension (willingness to listen, credibility, and comprehensibility). The subjects reported a significantly lower willingness to listen after seeing the ethical appeal opening than after the other two openings. The same pattern of results can be observed with regard to comprehensibility. But the ethical appeal did lead to a higher score for credibility.

Conclusion

Our main question was: do listeners perceive and respond to differences in openings techniques? The answer to that question is a clear yes.

1. Listeners respond differently to different opening techniques.
2. Listeners do so in a predictable manner. The ethical appeal enhances the speaker's credibility but is less able to promote a willingness to listen and comprehensibility than the other two techniques. The "your problem" approach and anecdotal opening are more able to promote a willingness to listen and comprehensibility than the ethical appeal.

It is important to realize that these conclusions are based on the opinions of the listeners (observed in the questionnaires) directly after the introduction. No speech followed. These results do not imply that listeners actually listen more carefully during the whole following speech. Perhaps exordial effects are short-lived and have little impact on the final result of the presentation. If so, listeners will learn an equal amount of information regardless of the speaker's opening. Therefore, a second experiment was initiated.

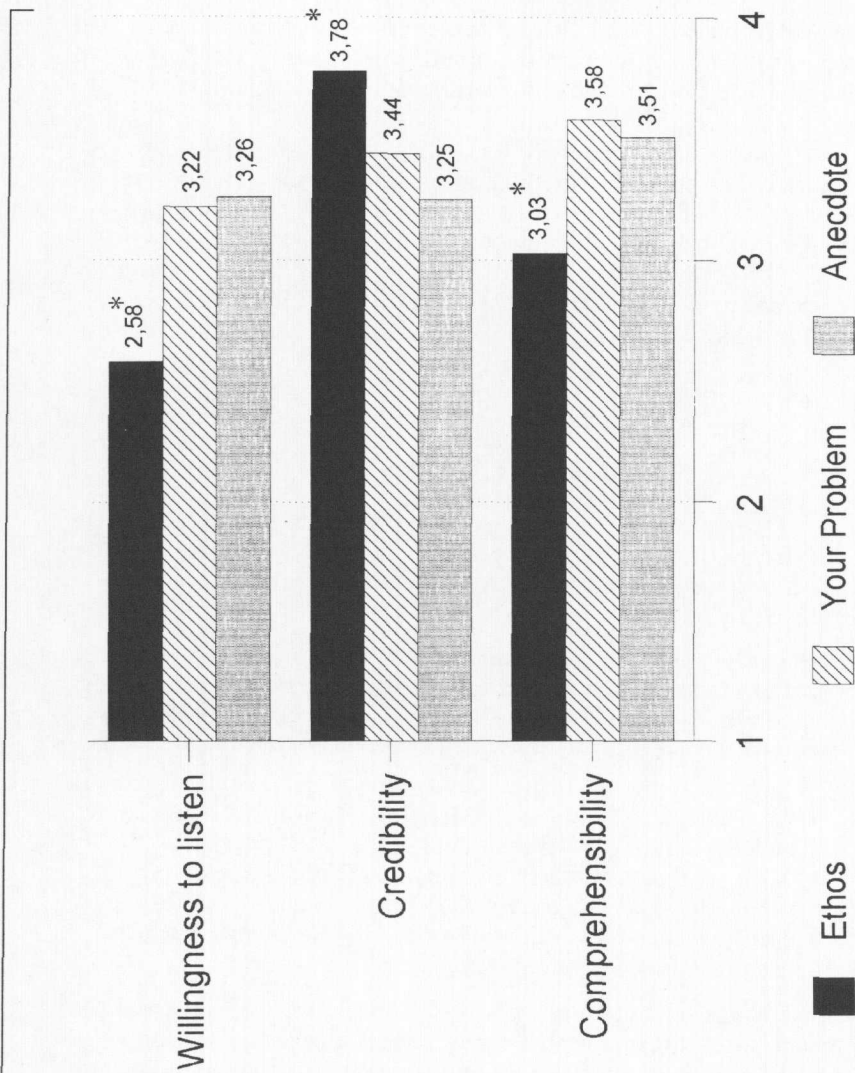


Figure 1. Differences between introductions (N=278; *p<0.01).

Exordial Techniques and Retention

Do introduction techniques influence how an audience processes the entire speech? Or is the introduction just a minor element in the listeners' experience? Traditionally the introduction is, after all, only about ten percent of the whole speech. To investigate this effect in a follow-up experiment, a complete speech was written on the subject of SBS. It was not possible to investigate all three exordial techniques at one time because of the numbers of subjects needed. We had to

choose, and chose to focus first on the anecdotal technique. Our choice was prompted by Edward Corbett's assessment that the anecdotal opening is "one of the oldest and most effective gambits for seizing the attention" (286).

We then restated the research question to whether or not it makes a difference if a speech has an anecdotal introduction. By "difference," we mean, whether listeners assess the full speech with an anecdotal introduction differently with respect to its credibility, comprehensibility, and willingness to listen from a speech without such an opener. In addition, do they remember the contents of an informative speech better if it begins with an anecdote? A second issue is the nature of the anecdote. Must the anecdote be about the topic of the talk, or is an arbitrary story useful as well? Can every story be used to seize the attention of the listeners?

Construction of the Speech

To answer these questions, we wrote an informative speech. The body of the speech opened with an overview (here translated into English):

In the next twenty minutes, I'd like to show you how you can establish in a simple way how sick the building is in which you and your colleagues work. In my presentation I will answer the following questions. [Speaker points at a transparency on the overhead projector]:

- What misunderstandings are there about the expression "Sick Building Syndrome"?
- What are the symptoms? I will not discuss all the details because it would take the entire afternoon to do so.
- Finally, how can we make a diagnosis? If time permits, I would like to discuss a few remedies with you.

The speech was accompanied by several transparencies. The text of the speech was pretested with a national Sick Building Advisors Group. They judged the usability and the reality value of the speech and characterized it as both useful and professional. In fact, they asked if they could adopt it for their own Public Relations Department.

The anecdotal opener used in the first experiment was re-used here to open the speech (see Appendix A1). This anecdote describes a man who complained to his boss about headaches that he got from working in a newly built office. After various attempts at locating the cause of the headaches, officials finally traced them to the indoor climate of the building. The story demonstrates the difficulties of diagnosing such causes as well as the fact that buildings do cause health effects.

A second introduction (Appendix A4) was also developed on a different topic not relevant to SBS. It tells the story of an employee

who complained continuously about the chatter of his colleagues. He quit the job, but then missed his colleagues. The anecdote showed that working in close proximity to others can have benefits, even if they are noisy sometimes. Both anecdotes had the same number of words, and even many of the same words. They also employed similar stylistical forms and patterns of developments. In a pretest, we established that:

- Both anecdotes promoted a willingness to listen to the same degree.
- The relevant anecdote was indeed rated as much more relevant to SBS than the irrelevant anecdote.

We then made three different videos. The body of the speech was the same in all, starting with the goal of the presentation and an advance organizer overviewing the topics. The first video began with the relevant anecdote that introduced the problem of the presentation in a concrete manner; the second started with the non-relevant anecdote; and the third began with the body of the speech itself—where the anecdotes in the other two videos ended.

Design

To establish possible differences between the three test conditions, we constructed a comparable multi-part questionnaire like that in the first experiment. The first part ascertained the respondent's knowledge and interest in SBS. The second part consisted of twenty statements on the comprehensibility of the speech, the respondent's willingness to listen, and the credibility of the speaker. Answers used a five-point Likert scale. The third—new—part of the questionnaire tested the respondent's understanding of information from the speech, for instance:

1. What was the earliest meaning of the concept of "Sick Building Syndrome"?
2. What building characteristics can help reduce the likelihood that a building will be "sick"?

Procedure

This experiment used as subjects a different group of students from Delft University of Technology, although their mean age (22) and knowledge of the subject were similar (knowledge about the topic: 2.1, interest: 3.2, and usefulness for their future profession: 3.1, all on a five-point scale).

In groups of about forty (total N=132), the students viewed the three different speech videos. All subjects filled in the multi-part questionnaire (the first part before seeing the video, the latter two

parts after viewing). Two independent judges rated the answers on the open questions with fairly high inter-rater reliability (.81). A total score was recalculated to a score between zero and five to ease comparison with the other results.

Results

Figure 2 shows the differences in response to the three speeches. The differences between the speeches with an introduction and the one without are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The anecdotes led

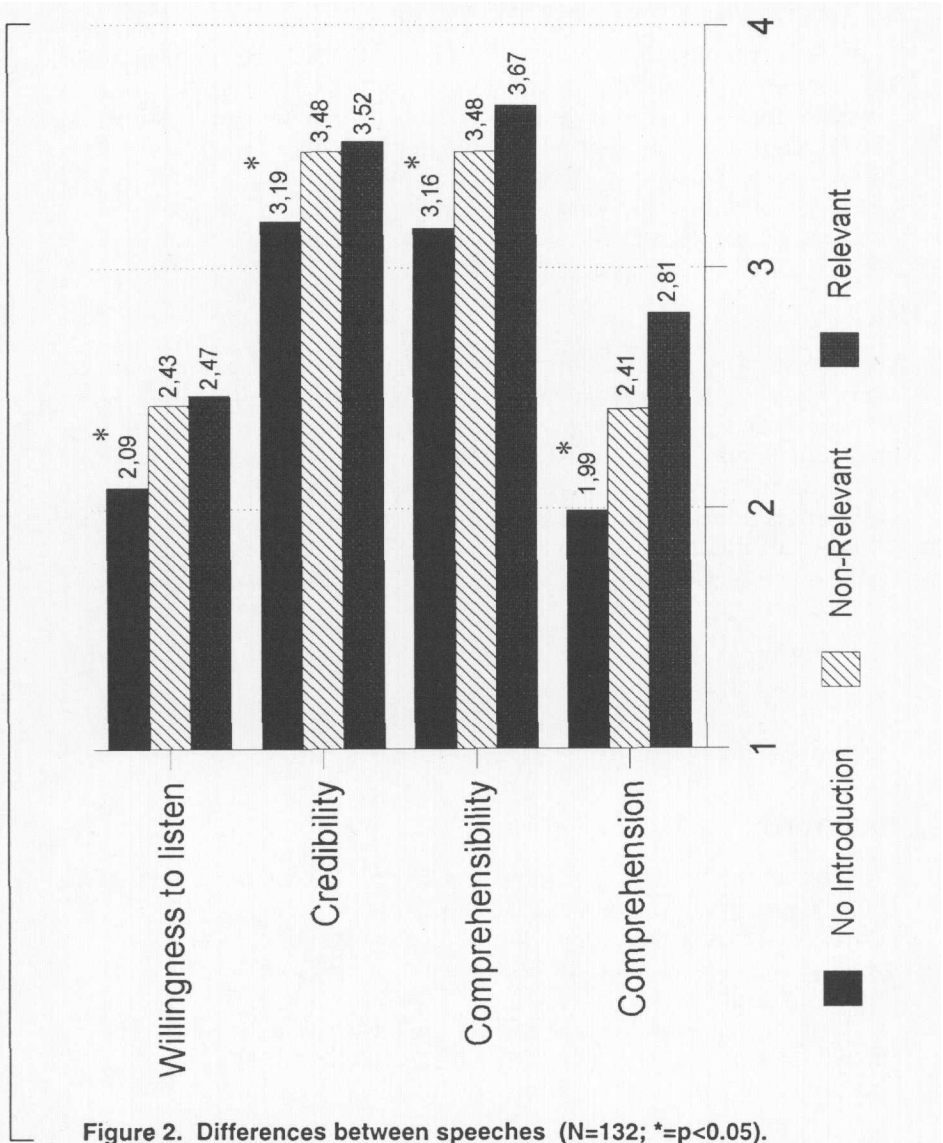


Figure 2. Differences between speeches (N=132; * $p < 0.05$).

to significantly higher ratings of the presentation's comprehensibility and interest as well as the speaker's credibility. The presence of an anecdote also resulted in higher retention scores. Oddly enough, the *relevance* of the anecdote did not seem to make a difference in the ratings.

Conclusions

A talk with an introduction, even a short one, makes audiences more willing to listen, think more highly of the speaker, and understand the speech better than a talk without such an opening. As one form of introduction, an anecdote gets the audience's attention and heightens interest so that the audience remembers more. The first experiment shows that audiences do respond to exordial techniques, and in a predictable manner. The second demonstrates the lasting effect of an introduction in helping audiences retain messages after a twenty minute talk.

Speakers preparing presentations, then, need to recognize the importance of creating a good introduction. Anecdotes are one good opener, and differences in effectiveness between relevant and irrelevant ones are small. Both captivate; the relevant one may lead to a slight gain in comprehension. In future research we will further investigate the two other techniques (ethical appeal and "your problem" approach) and we will involve another group of subjects who do not have a background in engineering. But we can already say to our students if they come to us with a presentation without an introduction: "Make a new plan, Stan. There must be fifty ways to start a presentation."

Works Cited

- Beason, Larry. "Strategies for Establishing an Effective Persona: An Analysis of Appeals to Ethos in Business Speeches." *Journal of Business Communication* 28 (1991): 326-46.
- Cicero. *De Inventione*. Trans. H. M. Hubbell. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Corbett, Edward P. J. *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Dempsey, Richard H., and N. Lamar Reinsch, Jr. "Arousal as a Confounding Variable: A Case Study in Credibility Research." ERIC Document 219 825, 1982.
- Gruner, Charles R. "Speaker Ethos, Self-Disparaging Humour, and Perceived Sense of Humour." Annual Meeting of the International Conference on Humour. Washington, D.C., 1982. [ERIC Document 220 879].

- Harms, L. Stanley. "Listener Judgements of Status Cues in Speech." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 47 (1961): 168.
- Kurvers, Stanley R., et al. *Handleiding voor de aanpak van gebouw-en werkplekgerelateerde klachten*. Den Haag: Sdu Uitgeverij, 1994.
- McCroskey, James C. *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972.
- McCroskey, James C., and T. J. Young. "Ethos and Credibility: The Construct and Its Measurement after Three Decades." *Central States Speech Journal* 32 (1981): 24-34.
- Osborn, Michael, and Suzanne Osborn. *Public Speaking*. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.
- Spek, Erik van der. *De Eerste Klap, 20 Beproefde Technieken*. Alphen a/d Rijn: Samson/Nive, 1995.
- Verderber, Rudolph F. *The Challenge of Effective Speaking*. 9th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1994.

Appendix

Text of Test Introductions

This appendix contains the text of the four introductions used in the study. In the test scenario, the speech, titled "Sick Building Syndrome: An Underestimated Problem," was delivered by a person we called Erik de Graaff, M.Sc., on the staff of Bruin Slot and Partners, Delft, a working conditions consultancy. The presentation is one in a series in a day-long engineering education seminar about the new Dutch law on working conditions (ARBO-law). The day's topics are stress prevention, flexible working days, job rotation, and Sick Building Syndrome.

1. (Relevant) Anecdote

Good morning.

A good friend of mine worked in a big newly built office building in the Hague. An office garden. Unlike his previous office, he suffered here almost continuously from a lot of headaches and colds. He complained to his boss, but was told that there was nothing wrong. Everyone just had to get used to the new building. After three months, however, the headaches and colds continued. So there was an investigation to establish the air quality. The amount of fresh air per person was measured and the outcome complied completely with the rules. Not until other colleagues started to complain was there was another investigation. The company hit upon the idea of researching the quality of the air itself. There turned out to be several contaminant sources in the air-conditioning. Although the quantity of air was adequate, it was not really fresh. This story shows that a good diagnosis of the indoor climate in office buildings is a big problem.

2. Ethical appeal

Good morning.

My name is Erik de Graaff. I started six years ago as a consultant at the ARBO-consultancy Bruin Slot and Partners in Delft. We are a market leader in the field of research on working space and indoor climate as part of the ARBO-law.

Appendix (cont.)

In the last few years we have gained a lot of experience with the so-called ARBO-quality-scan. This is a special method we established to diagnose working conditions. We have successfully used this method on generally recognized Sick Buildings like the KPN head-office, the Department of Social Services, and the Royal Library. Based on this experience, I would like to explain how a reliable quality scan can be made with the usually limited means that are available within the company.

3. "Your problem"

Good morning.

Suppose, some time after your graduation, you start a job as a manager of a middle sized technical company. Or you become a member of the works council of that company.

And suppose you are faced with complaints from employees about the building and their offices. It is too hot, it is too cold, the air is stale, they suffer from headaches, dry eyes, nose and throat symptoms, pain in the neck. They complain about uncomfortable chairs. Your building suffers, according to some, from the mysterious Sick Building Syndrome.

Some complaints are just exaggerations, but that many complaints can't be a coincidence. How will you handle these complaints? How do you trace their cause? That problem is the subject of this lecture.

4. (Non-relevant) Anecdote

Good morning.

A good friend of mine worked in a big newly built office building in the Hague. An office garden. Throughout the day, he heard his colleagues talk. He heard the secretary call her mother. He heard his colleagues analyze yesterday's soccer match of FC The Hague. He went to his boss to complain. "This building makes me sick," he said. His boss told him there was nothing wrong, only the usual problems with a new building. But after three months he was still complaining.

So he went out to find a new job and actually found one—in a nice old building in the city of Delft. It was there that he got a room of his own. And what were the results? Ultimate quiet, no more chatting. And what happened then? Without the direct contact with his colleagues, he lost his productivity. There was enough quiet but it was not really inspiring. This story shows that you have to consider well before you change your working environment.

5. Overview

In the next twenty minutes I would like to show you how can you establish, in a simple way, how sick the building is in which you and your colleagues work. In my talk I will answer the following questions (speaker points at a transparency on the overhead projector):

- What misunderstandings are there about the expression "Sick Building Syndrome"?
- What are the symptoms? I will not discuss all the details, because it would take the entire afternoon to do so.
- Finally, how can we make a diagnosis? If time permits, I would like to discuss a few remedies with you.



Bas A. Andeweg is an assistant professor of communication at the Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands, where he teaches courses in oral and written communication. He has published articles about technical report writing, business communication, and using new media to teach composition.

Jaap C. de Jong is an assistant professor of communication at the Delft University of Technology where he teaches courses in oral and written communication. He is an editor of *Onze Taal* (*Our Language*), a Dutch journal on language. He has written books about business correspondence, technical report writing, oral presentation, and style.

Hans Hoeken is an assistant professor of communication at the Nijmegen University, The Netherlands. His Ph.D. thesis was *The Design of Persuasive Texts: Effects of Content, Structure, and Style on Attitude Formation* (1995). Recently, he published a book on old and new research on persuasive texts (*Het antwerp van overtuigende telisten, Wat onderzoek leert over de opzet van effectieve reclame en voorlichting* [*The Design of Persuasive Texts*]. Uitgeverij: Coutinho, 1998).