Editing Out Loud

When words are meant to be spoken

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The goals of editing are generally the same whether the material is meant to be printed or spoken:

- logical structure
- clear key messages
- factually correct
- language appropriate for the audience
- correct length

However, the techniques an editor uses to accomplish these goals will often be different when the words are going to be spoken.

Editing spoken word can be broken down into two main goals:

1. Help the speaker deliver
2. Help the listener absorb

Help the speaker deliver

Here are some things to keep in mind to help the speaker deliver the text clearly and convincingly.

1. The vocabulary and tone should sound natural for the speaker and appropriate for the type of content (professional, motivational, informational, entertaining etc.). Speakers should not sound like they are reading or trying to take on an unfamiliar persona.
2. Using second person is often the most effective way to form a connection between the speaker and the listeners. Minimize the use of passive voice and impersonal pronouns.
3. Ensure that the content fits the amount of time the speaker has been allotted. In general, people speak conversationally at around 145 words per minute. For a speech or presentation, aim for 115-125 words per minute for clarity and to allow for pauses and reactions. (But be aware that nervous speakers often speed up as they go.)
4. *Read the content out loud* (or have someone else read it out, ideally the speaker) with a pen or highlighter in hand and make note of of potential stumbling points or awkward phrases that need to be changed (alliteration, tongue twisters, etc.) as well as timing.
5. Format the text double-spaced with wide margins so that the speaker can make notes to help with delivery.

6. Use bold or underlining to emphasize words, not italics. (Italics can be used for "stage directions" on a separate line. These can indicate when to pause for visuals, use props, or even just take a breath.)
7. Use punctuation expressively to help the speaker deliver the content with feeling. Don't worry about "correct" punctuation. Use exclamation points (enthusiasm or anger), scare quotes (sarcasm or key phrase), and question marks (inquiry, disbelief, setting up a statement) to indicate mood and intonation. Use dashes and ellipses to create pauses, rather than commas. They create a stronger visual break between words.
8. Provide pronunciation guides for difficult names or words either next to the word, on a separate page, or at the top of the page so that the speaker can glance at them if necessary.
9. Use common sense when deciding which abbreviations, symbols, acronyms, and numbers to write out and which to keep abbreviated. Again, notice where you stumble or pause when *reading it out loud*. Generally, small numbers should be written as digits, long numbers (such as thousands and millions) using digits plus words. (e.g. 6 million)

Help the listener absorb

A listener is at a disadvantage compared with a reader. Readers can always flip back to re-read something if they didn't quite get it the first time, or if they weren't really paying attention. Once you've lost listeners, you might not get them back. Here are some tips for helping the listener to enjoy and absorb the content.

1. Start by doing a structural edit of the content. Pay attention to the logical flow. Does it build, or does it jump around?
2. What does the listener know? Try not to make assumptions about what they know, but also avoid over-explaining in a patronizing way. Think about cultural and generational assumptions as well as specialized knowledge.
3. Talk *to* the listeners, not *at* them. Create a connection between the speaker and the listeners by using familiar language and a conversational delivery.
4. Introduce terms or acronyms/initialisms that may be unfamiliar, or use the full term to avoid confusion.
5. Repetition is good! Since the listener can't "flip back" to review what was said earlier, repeat key messages before you build on them. Include a summary at the end.
6. Be memorable. Use short, punchy sentences that the listener will absorb and retain, especially for your key messages. If a listener wants to tell someone else about the content, give them memorable phrases to pass along.
7. Listening and reading/watching at the same time is very difficult! If the visuals are complex or compelling, let the listener absorb them before continuing with the spoken content. Avoid complex flow charts, graphs, etc. that will distract the audience. Also avoid writing everything the speaker will say on a slide. Visuals should support or enhance what is being said.