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Successful Presentation

Presenting information to others is a key skill required in most professions today. Deciding on your message, preparation and practice are the keystones to successful presentation.

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The Art of Presentation

“There are two types of speakers: those that are nervous and those that are liars.” Mark Twain (1835–1910).

Being invited to give a talk, or present information to colleagues, is both flattering and exhilarating. But the initial euphoria soon wears off and the reality of actually performing fills most people with utter dread. Public speaking is one of the most feared occasions for most people. It would be very unusual to find someone who did not get at least a *little* nervous before standing up in front of an audience. Presenting is very public and all eyes will be on you. This is *your* chance to shine, to show what you know and deliver it well. It can also help determine the outcome of a meeting or negotiation. A great presentation needs to *persuade*. All too often we perform well below our expectations because we are anxious and often badly prepared. Many presenters give little or no thought as to what their slides look like, or how their message will be delivered. Despite the huge sums of money companies spend on advertising and publicity, little is spent on training the workforce to use PowerPoint, or present well. On top of all this, there are the technical aspects which often faze the novice presenter, involving laptops, microphones and lighting.



When we think of presentations, we often imagine erudite professors standing on a stage behind a lectern giving a very formal talk, but we are exposed to slick presentations every day, for example news presenters and chat show hosts on TV. It is a fact of life that in most professions today we are expected to “present”, for example:

- Briefing your manager on the progress of a project
- Negotiating your role within a company, possibly seeking a pay rise
- Presenting the latest sales figures or performance targets to your team

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- Lecturing on a specialized topic to peers or a lay audience
- Giving research seminars to colleagues
- Invited talks to specialist societies locally, nationally and internationally
- Giving evidence in court
- Giving the best man's speech at a wedding

Secrets of great presentation

We have all listened to speakers who are engaging individuals, who seem totally in control of their audiovisual aids and their mouths! These guys are born presenters, surely? Up to a point this may be true, but most great presenters are at the top of their game because *they work very hard to be there*. They plan meticulously, design their “story” carefully and invest many hours rehearsing so their presentation delivers a clear message. They are also very skillful at constructing slideshows that *complement* their message rather than distract the audience. The bottom line: great presenters inform us but most of all, they *inspire* us!

So, there are no real “secrets” or quick fixes, but rest assured that with practice and planning we can all deliver knockout pitches! But you need to *want* to improve.

But is it art?

Absolutely! This is true showmanship. You could be the most knowledgeable professor who ever lived but if you cannot deliver your message well this is a lost opportunity. Presenting effectively takes much practice. With experience you will improve. Trust me, even if your presentations are clumsy now they will get better. Many of the techniques used by presenters are similar to those used by actors in terms of delivery, voice, breathing technique, timing, drama, holding one's frame, all of which give your presentation maximum impact. So this really *is* an art, and one worth working at, since there are few careers that would not benefit from well-honed presentation skills.

We will cover all aspects of presentation technique in the book which, hopefully, will provide guidance which will help shape your talks, aid delivery of your material and boost your confidence.

Hot tip



Delivering a great presentation requires solid planning and extensive rehearsal. Invest time in these areas to ensure your pitch is good.

Keys to Success

Solid preparation is an absolute must. Without this, your presentation will lack clarity and direction, and your message will be lost. Investing substantial amounts of preparation time ahead of your presentation will ensure smooth flow and will also give you the confidence needed which is crucially important if you are to give a persuasive talk.

So what are the components of successful presentation?

Solid preparation

Well ahead of the actual presentation, you need to have a clear idea of what your key messages will comprise. You may be an expert in the field, but it still pays to spend time reviewing what is already known about the topic. Include the latest research findings, especially if this is a fast-moving field. This helps make your talk appear fresh. It also avoids the embarrassment of omitting data that may be known to the audience albeit not known to you!

Connection with the audience

This is a complex area, and includes rapport, empathy and other characteristics. The audience want to like you and for your talk to go well. You need to use eye contact and body language to get your message across and, for some of the information (certainly the key messages), to be learned. If you bore the audience, perhaps through lack of conviction or because you turn your back to them while you read your slides, your message will be lost and the opportunity wasted.

Having a clear message

Are you *absolutely* clear what message you are trying to get across? Is the content fresh? If you are not completely clear then you cannot expect the audience to follow the arguments and come away with some solid key messages. Write down the key points that you want conveyed by your talk, *then* construct your presentation around these. Your presentation needs a story – get this straight and the rest will follow.

Use of appropriate visual aids

Some aids such as computer-generated slides can enhance your presentation, emphasizing key points. Using graphics can convey a great deal of information. However, these aids can become so overbearing that the messages are lost (*this is discussed later in Chapter 6*).

Beware



Make sure you define your key messages before you start to draft your presentation.

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Confidence

This is probably your most powerful tool. Mediocre content delivered by a confident presenter may succeed but even the best content delivered by an unconfident presenter will fail.

Conviction

If you have no conviction about the topic or product why should the audience? This characteristic goes hand in hand with confidence. Together they are incredibly powerful, especially when you are aiming to influence the audience's behavior.

Enthusiasm of the speaker

Again, this goes pretty much along with confidence and conviction. Be enthusiastic! It is actually fairly infectious. If you are enthusiastic it will make the audience much more receptive to what you have to say.

Ensure your material is relevant to the audience

This goes without saying – or does it? Are you sure the material you are going to present is *actually* what they want to hear?

Planning

Decide on your key messages and plan your presentation around this. Work out, in rough, what material you could use that would help support your key messages. Start early to avoid rushing the process since you risk missing out important material.

Body language

Be assured but not cocky or too smart. The way you stand, move and articulate is picked up by the audience very quickly. Getting this right can make you look very masterful and in control.

Successful question and answer handling

Often a dreaded part of any pitch. You can easily be wrong-footed. This important area is discussed in detail later.

Handouts

People like mementos. Audiences don't mind writing notes but they do not generally possess shorthand skills and they want to listen to you rather than spend their time scribbling notes. Give them good handouts that reinforce your message.

Don't forget



Even if your slides are not the best, you can still make a big impression if you deliver with passion.

Don't forget

You have been chosen to give this presentation because you know more than the audience.

Why Have They Asked You?

Unless you have nominated yourself to give this talk (unlikely) then someone has consciously chosen *you* to present. Why might this be?

- You have above-average knowledge of the topic. This is worth remembering when you feel nervous, or that your presentation may not be good enough. It is almost guaranteed that you will know more than the audience about your topic
- You are working in the field and have first-hand experience
- You may be the team leader or a key member of the team with a major role in the project
- People have heard you present before and know you do it well
- Companies often have a “speakers bureau”, which is a panel of seasoned key opinion leaders who understand the area well, are respected in their field and are well known to the audience. Speakers like this are often nurtured by companies because they deliver “on-message”



What if you do not feel qualified?

If you honestly feel you cannot present on the chosen topic you must say so. Although you may feel flattered to be asked, you do not want to stand up in front of an audience and talk about subjects that are foreign or unfamiliar. You will give the game away when it comes to Questions and Answers, and you will lose credibility. In these situations it is better to decline politely and offer one or two names of experienced speakers if you have colleagues who would be better placed than you to deliver the presentation, or suggest a topic you *can* talk about confidently.

What is Expected From You?

This is the most fundamental question to ask yourself when invited to give a presentation: *“What do they want to know?”*

What is the title of your presentation?

Do you understand it? Sometimes titles can be cryptic so if you are not sure what the title means – ask!

The agenda

There is an agenda to every meeting, conference or telephone conference. Are you clear you know what this is?

If you are presenting sales figures to your local team at work, for example, then the remit of your talk will be very obvious.

Is this part of a conference program?

If you are presenting in a session with other speakers are you clear about what they will be talking about? This helps avoid the embarrassment of having slides similar to your co-presenters. It makes you look sloppy and the audience will construe this as a speaker who has not bothered to find out what he or she is meant to be doing and making sure it fits in with his or her co-presenters’ material. Confer with your co-presenters early on. Arrange a telephone conference to discuss the areas you each wish to cover.

Delivery

Delivery of material to colleagues round a table is very different to speaking to several hundred delegates at a conference. How will you deliver your presentation?

Are they expecting interaction?

This works with small groups, possibly up to 50 people, but once the audience rises to 60 and beyond this becomes very difficult. I have seen speakers try to take questions during their speech only to find they cannot hear the question properly and the whole experience becomes quite embarrassing.

Length of presentation

How many minutes is your talking time and how long do you have for questions? You must bear this in mind when you plan your presentation. Audiences are very unforgiving when it comes to speakers that overrun their time slot, especially if it leaves little time for questions. It is far better to finish early – audiences never seem to complain about this!

Hot tip



Talk to the organizers and clarify the objectives of your presentation.

Don't forget



Find out how long you are speaking for and how many minutes you have for Q & A.

Formal Presentations

Formal presentations are often major events or conferences. They allow people to showcase their expertise and it is an exciting opportunity. But people are often scared of formal talks, largely because the timings are strict, the audience is an unknown commodity, and the fear of failure or something going wrong gets the adrenalin flowing! Invitations are generally sent out many months ahead with *potentially* lots of preparation time. However, human nature being what it is, we often leave the writing of our talks until fairly close to the date of the event! This leads to panic, poor slide design, and an overall state of anxiety.

The net effect of all this leads to a suboptimal performance which makes us very wary of accepting an invitation next time. This vicious cycle can be broken by learning to present well – this will boost your confidence and make you more likely to present again and become even better!

However, it need not be like this. As with all presentations, large and small, get the following straight:

- What is the structure of the session?
- Who are the speakers?
- What are they covering in their talks?
- What is the title of your slot and exactly what do they want from your presentation?
- Research the audience, their experience and their expectations
- How long is your presentation and how many minutes have they allowed for questions?
- Do they want your slides in advance of the meeting? Quite often they will ask for finished slides two or more weeks ahead of the conference in order to allow time for printing
- Do you need to bring your presentation on CD ROM, flash disk or on another format?
- Are they providing all the audiovisual support? Some speakers like to use their own laptops for presenting but this can cause further unforeseen problems
- Are they printing handouts or must you supply these?

Informal Presentations

People are less anxious when asked to give informal presentations. However, you should take the same care as you would for a formal presentation. In fact, the informal events may be *more* error-prone than formal presentations because:

- You are more relaxed when you plan
- You are also more relaxed when you present
- You may leave the writing and slide design until close to the event and end up rushing the process
- Slides and other audiovisual aids may be imperfect but you feel you can muddle through
- Your audience is much more likely to challenge statements (and heckle!) than in the formal setting when they might be more inhibited
- You can see the audience up close and this is often more stress-inducing than addressing a faceless mass of people

As with the formal event, make sure you are absolutely clear what they want you to cover, for how long, whether it can be interactive, should you bring handouts or will the organizers print these for you, do they need your slides in advance or are they expecting you to use a white board or flip chart?

Usually you do not have to send your slides in advance and can take them to the meeting on a USB flash disk. You can also probably use your own laptop for the presentation.

Dress code

What do you wear if your audience is going to be dressed in T-shirts and jeans? Should you wear the same? For these events smart-casual may be reasonable, or even smarter – wear your normal business clothes. This will give you more confidence and style and will separate you from the audience (unless you are an audience member who is taking part in a session where several audience members are expected to present, in which case it would be better to conform to their dress code).

By dressing smartly the audience is more likely to take you and your messages seriously. You will have more gravitas if you appear smartly dressed and in control.

Beware



Avoid being too relaxed or you may be caught unawares. Informal presentations require planning, too.

The Audience

The audience is key. The event is *about* them and *for* them. Your presentation must be designed with the audience in mind.

This is what can make or break your confidence, in many ways. Get it right and the whole event will be rewarding and you will be keen to do it again, but if the audience is lukewarm or even worse, hostile, it can put you off ever getting up on stage again!

Do some research on the audience – find out as much as you can about them. This will ensure you tailor your presentation better.

Hot tip



Research the audience – this helps make sure your presentation is pitched appropriately.

Consider:

- Who are you addressing?
- What is their level of knowledge?
- What do they know about the subject you are talking about?
- How many of them are there?



- If you are presenting technical or other specialized information to a lay (non-specialized) audience try to avoid over-use of jargon otherwise you will lose them
- If you are presenting to peers then the use of jargon is expected, and you should not “dumb down” your talk

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- What is their native language? If it is not English you will need to simplify your slides and your speech. You will also need to use less slides because each one will take longer to present
- What do the audience expect to gain from your presentation? Are they expecting to hear the latest advances in the field? Are they looking to you to provide direction to help them carry out their job? Do they expect you to provide your opinions or to be non-judgmental?
- Does this audience have strong views one way or the other? This is useful to know in advance since it helps you develop your pitch
- Could there be resistance from the audience? They might not want to follow your key messages
- What style of presentation would suit this audience? You want to be able to reach the audience but the format of the presentation might prevent this. Would a relaxed interactive talk be preferable to one where you stand behind a lectern for one hour giving a didactic lecture?
- If you have co-presenters make sure you know what they will be covering otherwise you may end up duplicating information and the audience will be disappointed



Beware



If you are one of a group of presenters, coordinate with your co-presenters to ensure your talk does not overlap with theirs.

Hot tip

Write the conclusions before you draft the rest of the speech. The content should match the conclusions.

Key Messages

These define your presentation. If there is no key message then it is hardly worth the effort of getting up to speak. But I would hope you do have key messages and the aim should be to make these as obvious and unambiguous as possible.

The key messages should provide focus to your presentation.

Decide on your ending before you start writing

This is the punchline. Once you have decided what this is, you can create your presentation since you know where you want to get to by the end of the presentation.

Tell them what the key points are right upfront

That will help them focus on what you say later, and helps them understand why you are showing them particular graphs, charts or other information.

Repeat the key points again at the end

This helps reinforce the message and with any luck these will be the points they will remember long after the event is over.



You are aiming to influence behavior or opinion

If the presentation is scientific the key messages are generally related to how something works or happens, and the evidence backing up your statement will make up much of the talk.

If your presentation relates to company or team performance then your key messages will relate to specific robust data to back up your statements.

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Keep the messages simple but not simplistic

Elaborate words and fancy graphics will fail if your message is not clear.

You don't need many key messages

It is probably best to have 3 or 4 key points that you want the audience to retain after the presentation has ended. Skillful engineering of your speech and slides will help this happen.

Keep it relevant

Let them know who the key message is for (them), what they will do as a result of hearing the key messages (work better, harder, be more engaged with the company), and why the message will alter behavior.

Don't overdo the graphics

They may look great on your PC but when shown to an audience they may look conceited and simply there for effect (style over substance). They also make it harder for the audience to grasp the key concepts of your speech.

The slide is titled "Antisense therapy—Chronic myeloid leukaemia" and is divided into four quadrants. The top-left quadrant shows a diagram of the Philadelphia chromosome (22q) with a fusion gene on chromosome 9 and chromosome 22, leading to fusion mRNA and p210 protein, which results in chronic myeloid leukaemia. The top-right quadrant shows a diagram of a mature messenger RNA with a stretch of nucleotide bases (5' to 3') and a synthetic antisense oligonucleotide binding to a complementary mRNA sequence, preventing translation. The bottom-left quadrant is a microscopic image of cells. The bottom-right quadrant shows a diagram of a cell where DNA is transcribed into messenger RNA, which is then translated by a ribosome into proteins. The diagram illustrates that with antisense, there is no protein and no translation, while normally there is protein and translation.

Beware



Too many graphics or highly complex graphics may spoil a good presentation.

Gauging Your Performance

How can you tell if your presentation has been well-received? Sure, they will applaud at the end, but what other clues are there? Maybe you could count the number of people on the front row



who fall asleep or yawn during your talk (this does happen, and it can be quite disconcerting but don't take it too personally).

Conferences and other staged events often use feedback forms where the audience can rate each speaker,

their presentation content, delivery and other factors. These can be useful, particularly to the organizers, since they will not be likely to invite a bad speaker back again. So if you receive a regular stream of invites to speak then take this as a measure of your stage appeal.

A better method of determining whether you have had any impact might be whether people can recall your key messages, and whether what you have said has any influence on their behavior.

If you have presented information to your team it will be fairly obvious whether your presentation has had any bearing on the way they work, or on the way they think about specific areas of their work.

For large meetings, it may be more difficult to tell whether your message has sunk in, but there may be ways in which to tell. You may feel a specific practice is outdated and should be changed. You will have shown them why you think this, and you will have provided a key message about how you think it would be done better. From publications and talking to people you may notice that practice has indeed changed, moving towards your view.

If your talk has been motivational does your team now appear to be better motivated? Do they work better, or complain less?

If your talk was intended to bring all team members up to the same level so they work better together, does this appear to be the case?

Presentation Pitfalls

Like me, you must have sat through some pretty tedious presentations, with the speaker droning on whilst you either fall asleep, or start sending text messages on your cell phone. A bad speaker can make time appear to stand still!

Audiences tend to judge the speaker within the first few minutes of the start of a presentation, and if they judge you badly initially, it is very difficult to recover.

So what do audiences dislike?

- Fumbling awkward starts
- Apologetic speakers who make excuses about not having enough time to cover the subject properly
- Speakers who do not start on time or who finish late
- Presentations with no clear purpose and which fail to communicate well
- Speakers who read their slides to the audience
- Speakers who use too many slides
- Presenters who talk very quickly
- Slides with too much information or text that is difficult to read
- Poor quality graphics
- Cheesy animations, backgrounds or other gratuitous effects
- Speakers who turn their back on the audience or who do not engage with their audience
- Speakers who cannot control their AV equipment, pressing the back key instead of advance on the slides
- Bad, racist or sexist jokes
- Poor laser pointer control
- Skipping over “superfluous” slides (why are those slides in there at all?)
- Cartoons or graphics with no relevance to text on the slide

Beware



There are many clearly defined pitfalls when presenting. Be aware of these and avoid making them.

Summary

- In most professions you will be called on to give presentations from time to time
- At other times, such as weddings, leaving parties and other events, you may be asked to give a speech
- Learning good presentation technique is therefore useful in your personal as well as professional life
- Presenting well is not innate but takes skill, practice and determination
- Nervousness and anxiety are common and to be expected. The more presentations you give, the better you get and this will help to build your confidence
- Investing time in researching your topic is essential
- Decide on your key messages early on and construct your presentation around these
- What you say must be relevant to the audience. Resist the temptation to reuse slide decks or previous speeches. “One size fits all” does not work
- Rehearse your presentation several times before the big day and remove any unnecessary information from your slides. Simplicity is preferable to highly complex visuals
- Seek feedback on your performance and learn from any mistakes you make
- With practice you will fear presentations less, start to channel your nervousness, and begin to enjoy the challenge
- Learning to present well can only enhance your career, and bad presentations can lose you a sale and hinder your career progress!

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