

Oral Presentation and Powerpoint

I once attended a talk where the speaker held everyone's attention for a key five minutes by pulling the Seinfeld trick – putting on “a show about nothing.” An engineer at a small, struggling company, he was near the end of a slick Powerpoint presentation about whether the design for a critical machine should be modernized to speed up production, and he presented three options:

- (1) Retool the machine in-house, which would sacrifice a month of production time but result in faster output in the long run.
- (2) Buy a new machine from a known distributor, which would involve a hefty up-front expense but save labor costs and time;
- (3) Do nothing.

That's right – do nothing. Continue with production and learn to live with the sacrifices.

To dramatize this third point, the speaker filled the presentation screen – which up to then had held colorful Powerpoint slides employing slick transitions and graphics – with nothing. He simply left the screen blank, proposed the option of taking no action, and then shut off the projector. For the next five minutes, he engaged the audience members – which included the company president and the company accountant – by switching to a lecture format, moving around the room without so much as a pointer or note card, and arguing his case: that it was smarter for the company to maintain status quo, especially since it was struggling financially. Ultimately, he impressed his point on the audience not with the magic of presentation software, but with reasoning, creativity, common sense, and the bottom line. As the speaker hoped, the company bought into option number 3.

As this example demonstrates, effective oral presentation is more about creative thinking on your feet and basic skills than about wearing good shoes and knowing how to turn on the computer projector. Companies have long cried for graduates who can give dynamic talks, and they have long relied on talks as a key way to sway concerned parties towards a desired outcome. But many presenters make the mistake of trying to let the computer, bells and whistles blaring, do all the work for them. They forget the fundamentals of oral presentation, and thus whatever polish they have quickly loses its luster.

To become a modern speaker worth listening to, whether you're serving as a company representative or presenting at a conference, you must come fully prepared, engage your audience's attention and memory, attend to some visual design basics, and take stock of how you come across as a speaker.

Preparing for a Talk

There's a rule-of-thumb in carpentry: Measure twice, cut once. The tenets behind this principle should be obvious – once a mistake is made, it's difficult or impossible to undo. Though the carpenter can usually spackle or glue to repair, as a speaker you simply cannot get back those three minutes you just wasted in a fifteen-minute presentation. The following preparation principles will keep you right on plumb.

- Practice your talk straight through, and as you go jot quick notes to yourself about how to improve it. If you cannot manage to practice your talk straight through, perhaps you are not yet ready to offer it.
- Ideally, practice your talk under conditions similar to those in which you will give it, considering such factors as acoustics, distance from the audience, lighting, and room size. Lighting becomes especially important when computer equipment is involved. Be mentally prepared to adapt to the environmental conditions.
- As a draft, present your talk to a friend or two first and have them critique it. If you're really gutsy and can tolerate the unforgiving lens of the camcorder, videotape your practice talk and critique it afterwards.
- View all of your visuals from your audience's perspective prior to your talk. Be sure that your audience can easily see all that you want them to see, especially material that appears in the lower half of the screen.
- When you give a talk professionally, always request presentation guidelines from any relevant organizations and conform to them explicitly. It would be embarrassing for you if you were expected to present units in metric, for example, and you did otherwise because you failed to request or follow the available guidelines.
- As part of your preparation, choose an appropriately snappy and helpful title. You are expected not to come off as stodgy. Which talk would you rather attend: "Specific Geometrical Objects with Fractional Dimensions and Their Various Applications to Nature in General and The Universe At Large as we Know it" or "And On The Eighth Day, God Created Fractals"?
- Become highly familiar with any technology you'll be using. Practice with the actual hardware or type of hardware you'll be working with, making sure that compatibility or speed issues don't get in your way. I've seen students go to present at a conference with a zip disk of their talk confidently in hand, only to find that the computer they were using didn't have a zip drive. To facilitate faster computer speed, load your presentation onto the desktop if possible rather than run it from a CD or flash drive. If websites are needed as part of your presentation, check connection speeds and make sure all URLs are up and running.

Helping Your Audience Remember Your Key Points

Andy Warhol is known for the comment that everyone will be famous for 15 minutes. If your 15 minutes of fame is during your oral presentation, you want to be sure not to blow it. I'm amazed at how many times I've sat through a talk and come away with only a vague sense of what it was about. There are many reasons for this – some speakers view their talk as simply a format for reading a paper, while others fill the air with many words but little substance – but the most common reason is the simplest one: the *speaker* showed uncertainty about the talk's alleged subject. If you don't spell out your premise, highlight your key points, and make it easy for your audience to remember the thrust of your presentation, you can't expect your listeners to come away with understanding and investment.

To ensure an engaged audience for your talk, follow these practices:

- **Introduce and Conclude.** Use a formal introduction at the beginning of your talk and a summary afterwards to highlight your major points. Make sure your audience can remember your key points by keeping them simple and straightforward – even enumerated.
- **Present in Sections.** Give your talk “parts” – usually no more than three major parts for practical purposes – and let us know when we're transitioning from one part to the next. This will help your audience to remain interested and focused.
- **Spell out the Objective.** Give the talk's objective and even a hint of the conclusion right up front. Articulate the objective on its own slide so we can't miss it. Revisit the objective at the end if necessary to underscore how it was realized.
- **Use Props.** Consider the use of some simple, meaningful props – even pass them around. Props can generate audience interest and, especially if they represent the actual work you did, they make the nature of that work more concrete. I've been to great talks where an experimental sample or photographs representing production sites were passed around, and they often generated focused questions from the audience members afterwards.
- **Use Handouts.** If appropriate, give a handout. As long as it's well-designed, a concise written summary with bulleted points on a handout will ensure that your talk can be followed throughout. Such a handout should ideally be just one or two pages long, and be sure to time and manage its distribution so that it doesn't take away attention from you as you speak. One possibility for handouts is an actual printout of your slides through the “Handouts” option in Powerpoint, but be certain that your audience actually needs all of your slides before electing this option.
- **Offer Q&A.** If question and answer is involved as part of the end of the talk, don't let any questions deflect our interest. Some audience members might try to draw the attention to themselves, or focus on a mistake or uncertainty in your presentation, or even undermine your authority directly with an intimidating challenge. (I recall one speaker at a professional conference being tossed the

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strange question, “Your data is crap, isn’t it?”) Remember that the stage and agenda are yours, and it’s your job to keep it that way and end your talk with a bang, not a whimper. If you don’t know the answer to a question, admit it or offer to discuss it privately after the presentation, then move on. One savvy way to handle questions is to turn back to your presentation slides as you answer them – call up a slide that will help repeat or explain the relevant point – and this will remind your audience that your talk had substance.

Mastering the Basics of Slide Design

Powerpoint helps us to think of each projected page as a “slide” in a slideshow. But just as someone else’s home movies can be thoroughly uninteresting if they’re grainy, poor in quality, and irrelevant, Powerpoint slides that are too flashy, cluttered, meaningless, or poorly designed can quickly turn a darkened room full of smart people into a mere gathering of snoozers. As you design your slides, consider these factors:

- **Templates.** Even though Powerpoint helps you design your slides, don’t assume that someone else’s template will always match your needs. Take charge of slide design by considering first the most efficient way to transmit the necessary information.
- **Simplicity.** Keep slides as simple and uncluttered as possible, and if the information must be complex, prioritize it for your audience as you present it (e.g., if presenting a ten-column table, direct your audience to the most significant columns). Offer only one major point per illustration. If you need to focus on more than one point, re-present the illustration in another form on a separate slide with the different point emphasized.
- **Titles.** Give most slides titles, with a font size of at least 36 points, and body text with a font size of at least 24 points. If you need to cite a source of information, include the citation in a smaller font size at the bottom of your slide.
- **Rule of 8s.** Apply the “rule of 8s”: include no more than 8 words per line and 8 lines per slide.
- **Bullets.** When using bulleted lists in slides, present each bulleted line in parallel fashion – i.e., if the first line is a fragment, the others should be as well; if the first line opens with a verb, so should the others.
- **Design.** Design slides so that their longest dimension is horizontal rather than vertical. Use both uppercase and lowercase letters and orient pictures left to right. Avoid the overuse of animations and transitions, especially audio-based transitions, which can be distracting and downright silly.
- **Color.** Make sure the color for both the background and text are highly readable, especially under less than optimal lighting conditions. There’s nothing wrong with basic dark lettering and white background for your slides, particularly if they’re text-based. If you do choose a background theme or color, enhance continuity and viewability by keeping it consistent and subtle.

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- Images. When possible, replace words with images. Use images in particular when presenting data, demonstrating trends, simplifying complex issues, and visualizing abstractions.
- Spelling. Spelling does count, and you can't rely on Powerpoint to be an effective proofreader. Be sure your slides are free of grammatical and spelling errors. As Will Rogers quipped, "Nothing you can't spell will ever work."

Maintaining the Look and Sound of a Professional Speaker

Public speaking is often cited by people as their number one fear (with death, ironically, as number two). Clearly, no one overcomes such fear overnight, and no one set of tips can transmogrify you into a polished speaker. However, you can work through that fear by learning from the successes of others. As Christopher Lasch once noted, "Nothing succeeds like the appearance of success." Good speakers attend first to their wardrobe, dressing as well as their "highest ranking" audience member is likely to dress. An equally important part of looking and sounding like a professional speaker is how you handle your body language and your voice. You must exude confidence if you want to be taken seriously, and remember that a high percentage of your audience's perception is not about what you say but about how you look when you say it. The following guidelines will help you to look good and sound good as you give a talk:

- Take care not to stand in the way of your own slides – many speakers do this without even realizing it. Especially when using an overhead projector, point to the projected image of your slide (ideally, use a stick pointer or laser pointer) rather than the original source. This helps you avoid covering up more of the image than you intended and keeps our focus on the projected image rather than your accidental hand shadow puppet.
- Ideally, use the mouse pointer, a stick pointer, or a laser pointer to draw our attention to a particular item on the screen. One simple circle drawn briefly around the selected information is enough to draw our attention. Beware of slapping a stick pointer loudly against a screen, or leaving a laser pointer on for so long that its bright dot shakes all over the screen as a blazing red mirror of your nervousness.
- When you are not using a slide directly, keep it out of sight or out of your audience's line of attention. Turn off the projector or create a dark screen when no visuals are relevant; literally invite your audience to turn its attention away from one thing to another.
- When working with computer projection, do not trust that hardware will always perform as you anticipate. Sometimes equipment fails midstream, or what worked fine for one speaker in a group doesn't work for the next. If necessary, take backup transparencies of your slides ready for use on an overhead projector. Be certain that an overhead projector is available beforehand as a fallback.

- Don't forget the value of a good old-fashioned easel or chalkboard. Not only do they offer variety, they are especially good for writing down basic information that you also want your audience to muse over or write down, or for presenting a picture as it evolves via its individual pieces (e.g., a flow chart, schematic, or simple experimental set-up).
- Maintain eye contact with at least a few people – especially those who are being the most responsive – in various parts of the room. Conversely, if you're especially nervous about one or two audience members or you note some audience members looking sour or uninterested, avoid eye contact with them.
- Refer to time as an organizational tool: "For the next two minutes, I will summarize the city's housing problem, then I will move on to . . ." This keeps both you and your audience anchored.
- Use the "point, turn, talk" technique. Pause when you have to turn or point to something, then turn back towards the audience, then talk. This gives emphasis to the material and keeps you connected with audience members. Strictly avoid talking sideways or backwards at your audience.
- Use physical gestures sparingly and with intention. For instance, raise three fingers and say "thirdly" as you make your third point; pull your hands toward your chest slightly as you advocate the acceptance of an idea. Beware, though, of overusing your body, especially to the point of distraction. Some speakers habitually flip their hair, fiddle with their keys, or talk with their hands. I've heard some people recommend that speakers keep one hand in a pocket to avoid overusing physical gestures.
- Minimize the amount of walking necessary during your talk, but do stand rather than sit because it commands more authority. As you speak, keep your feet firmly rooted and avoid continual shuffling of your weight. Intentionally leaning slightly on one leg most of the time can help keep you comfortable and relaxed.
- Take care to pronounce all words correctly, especially those key to the discipline. Check pronunciation of ambiguous words beforehand to be certain. It would be embarrassing to mispronounce "Euclidian" or "Möbius strip" in front of a group of people that you want to impress. I once mispronounced the word "banal" during a speech to English professors and one of the audience members actually interrupted to correct me. Most of that speech was – as you might guess – banal.
- Dead air is much better than air filled with repeated "ums," "likes," and "you knows." Get to know your personal "dead air" fillers and eliminate them. Out of utter boredom during a rotten speech a few years ago, I counted the number of times the speaker (a professor) used the word "basically" as an empty transition – 44 times in just five minutes. Don't be afraid to pause occasionally to give your listeners time to digest your information and give yourself a moment for reorientation. To quote Martin Fraquhar, "Well-timed silence hath more eloquence than speech."
- If you know that you have a mannerism that you can't easily avoid – such as stuttering or a heavy accent – and it distracts you from making a good speech, consider getting past it by just pointing it out to the audience and moving on. I've

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been to several talks where the speaker opened by saying “Please accept the fact, as I have, that I’m a stutterer, and I’m likely to stutter a bit throughout my speech.” One such speaker even injected humor by noting that James Earl Jones, one of his heroes, was also once a stutterer, so he felt in good company. As you might guess, the following speeches were confidently and effectively delivered, and when the mannerism arose it was easy to overlook.

- Avoid clichés, slang, and colloquialisms, but don’t be so formal that you’re afraid to speak in contractions or straightforward, simple terms. Use visual language, concrete nouns, active single-word verbs. When using specialized or broad terms that might be new or controversial to some audience members, be sure to define them clearly, and be prepared to defend your definition.
- Be animated and enthusiastic, but carefully so – many notches above the “just-the facts” [Joe Friday](#) [1], but many notches below the over-the-top [Chris Rock](#) [2].

Self-Study

For more advice on giving oral presentations and the use of Powerpoint, visit these websites:

[“Powerpoint Presentations That are Not so Pretty” from about.com](#) [3]

[“Rethinking the Design of Presentation Slides” Powerpoint by author Michael Alley](#) [4]