

How to Give Your Best Presentation

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First, **prepare.**

Verbalize your goal.

Learn the fundamentals of persuasion.

Organize your talk.

Connect your thoughts; connect with your audience.

Anticipate.

Back up your technology.

Choose your visual aids.

Then, **practice.**

And now, **perform.**

Convey energy through movement.

Use your voice.

Interact with the audience.

Provide a distinct, memorable ending

Handle feedback.

Words to the wise...what *not* to do!

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“Persuasive presentation of an idea is almost as important as the idea itself.”

--David Greusel

Welcome to the Scientists’ School of Acting. At first blush it’s difficult to see what science and show business have in common, but both professions require a great deal of skill in communicating with audiences. Presentation is a form of performance, and whether the content presented is a Shakespearean monologue or an overview of gene therapies, the motivation is the same: to engage an audience, to keep its attention, and to change, in whatever measure, the way that audience thinks or feels about a particular subject. You are the actor/storyteller, PowerPoint is your prop, and your speech and movements—not the safe, written word—are the conveyors of your ideas.

Note the word “safe.” With performance comes anxiety. You are about to face a group of people, peers and mentors alike, with expressions of anticipation, skepticism, boredom, or even open hostility on their faces. Yet this is the time when you can be most effective. This is your opportunity to distill your message, to lead your listeners down a clear path toward a clear goal. If you have not had time to squeeze in Public Speaking 101 between endless hours in the lab, clinic, or lecture hall, this guide will give you the basics that can help you prepare, practice, and then deliver a great performance.

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First, prepare.

1. Verbalize your goal.

Think “high concept.” You must be able to construct one sentence—in your mind or on paper—that states the desired outcome of your speech. To construct this sentence ask yourself the following questions:

- What do I want my listeners to know, think, feel, or believe as a result of my talk? (Walters and Walters)
- What specific action do I want my audience to take as a result of this presentation? (Greusel)

Your goal should guide the creation of your presentation, i.e., be evident—though not explicit—in the introduction, body, and conclusion and provide the audience with a useful take-home message.

2. Learn the fundamentals of persuasion.

Before you start organizing the parts of your presentation remember that you want to persuade the audience to take a particular action. Here are two basically parallel constructs that you can adopt or adapt to help you get that result.

“**AIDA**” (not the opera) (Smedley and Borden)

Attention – Get the audience’s attention. (*Ho-hum...why should I pay attention? Here’s why!*)

Interest – Provoke their interest. (Why is this topic important to me, the listener?)

Desire – Create audience desire. (When would this problem be something for which I, the listener, really need a solution?)

Action – Tell your audience what he/she/they should do.

The motivated sequence (Monroe and Ehinger)

1. Grab attention.
2. Show a need or problem.
3. Present a solution.
4. Visualize the results.
5. Request action or approval.

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First, **prepare.** (cont'd)

3. Organize your talk.

Introduction: This is where you engage the audience and establish their expectations, so *get right to the point, preferably in the first two sentences.*

These two sentences could state your topic and ask a question or survey the audience. The rest of the introduction should

- identify your key message,
- put it into a larger context,
- provide enough background so that everyone can follow your talk.

The introduction is your opportunity to engage the audience not only intellectually but *personally*. Tell the audience something about yourself or your story that they don't already know. (See #4, below.)

Body: This is where you tell a story about the purpose of your work and the people involved. Briefly “explain *what* experiments you did, *why* you chose them, and *what* you learned from the results...” (Walters and Walters).

- Theory: Make it concrete by talking about a *practical implication*.
- Experimental result: Talk about a *practical application* of that result.
- Supporting points: Three or four is the optimal number. Check for continuity and flow from one point to the next.

Talk also about the way your thinking changed as the project went on, unexpected results, setbacks and how you overcame them. Include the still-unresolved questions—this will encourage your audience, in addition to asking questions, to make comments and give suggestions that may help you further your work.

Conclusion: If you began with a question, answer it here. If you want your audience to do something, tell them specifically what it is. As you close, reiterate your main message in one clear, strong sentence: “Memorize it. Say it with feeling at the end of your talk. Then stop talking.” There may be a moment of two or silence afterwards, but they will be followed by applause.” (Walters and Walters, p.22) *You hope!*

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First, **prepare.** (cont'd)

4. **Connect your thoughts; connect with your audience.**

Transitions

Transitions can recapture the attention of those whose minds have started to wander. Furthermore, they offer a chance to summarize one section of your presentation before moving on to the next.

- Make them smooth.
- Don't be too subtle. Transitions are ideally like large mile markers (one for each point of your presentation), indicating the audience's progress toward the shared destination

The Personal

The best presenters tell stories about their discoveries and about the people involved. This gives the audience a chance to relate to your experiences and to see the people involved—characters if you will—as real live human beings. Look for places “...where a story would bring the subject to life...Look for places where you can personalize your talk by telling why *you* are excited about the topic. Did you make a mistake in the course of your study which led you to discover something new or see something in a different way? Tell us about it....” (Walters and Walters)

5. **Anticipate.**

- The auditorium in Natcher Conference Center seats 500 and will be filled with an audience of approximately 500 medical professionals in the field. You will give your speech from the podium/lectern on the stage at the front of the auditorium. Plan your slide show accordingly.
- A yellow light will tell you when you have five minutes left to present, and a red light will flash if you have exceeded your time limit.
- The auditorium will be lit during introductions, plenary discussions, and question and answer periods. It will be darkened during computer presentations.

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First, **prepare.** (cont'd)

6. **Back up your technology.**

Everyone knows what can happen to the best laid plans. Have a back-up file, video, etc. Have *another* back-up! Have a back up *plan* in case something unforeseen happens, such as a power outage in the middle of your presentation.

7. **Choose your visual aids.**

- *Present one topic per slide.*
- *Use minimal text, in a large, clear font.*
- *Keep figures as simple as possible.*
- *Display slides only when they are relevant to what you are saying. At other times, it is preferable to have nothing displayed/ a blank slide, or perhaps a kind of a home slide, like wallpaper, that succinctly conveys your key message.*
- *For each slide, ask yourself*
 1. “Why is it there?”
 2. What does it show?
 3. Does it show this clearly?
 4. Does it support the key message?
 5. Is there anything there which doesn’t need to be there?
(If so, remove it.)
 6. When will it be shown?
 7. When will it be removed?” (Walters and Walters)

Your text color should contrast with the slide’s background. We suggest yellow text on a dark blue background.

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Then, **practice.**

- *Time it.* Practice aloud with your slides, video, and any other visuals. (If you practice too little, you will probably find that your speech is too long and you'll be cut off by the colored, flashing lights—see your [Speaker Guide](#) for timing.)
- *Identify trouble spots*, such as the need for a transition.
- *CUT the excess.* If you've timed yourself and you're running behind, now is the time to edit. Remember: Cut from the body, not from the conclusion. Then time the whole presentation again.
- Consider the possibility of *technical glitches or other interruptions*. Even the best presenters can't be prepared for everything, so pretend that something happens during your speech and figure out how to move on.

MOST IMPORTANT: *Don't practice too much or too mechanically.*

If you simply read aloud from your paper, note cards, or whatever, you'll be remembered, but not fondly. Even if you don't read, too much practice will make you sound like a suspect reeling off a rehearsed alibi. It is **best** to know what you are going to say, but not *exactly* how you are going to say it.

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And now, **perform.**

Performing is physical.
Presenting a paper is performing.
Presenting a paper is physical.

Face your audience, move your body, project your voice, and use your props.

1. Convey energy through movement.

- To relieve *tension* before you go on, try this exercise: Make a fist with your feet or hands, or some other body part that suits you, hold it for 5 seconds, release. (Greusel)
- *Before you begin*, look around the room, making eye contact for a few moments, and then begin to talk; your pause will create suspense. The audience uses these moments of quiet to *anticipate the message*; they become *engaged*.
- You may be stuck behind the podium, but you can *bend your knees, move the laser pointer around, change slides frequently, and sip water as needed*.
- Speak *energetically* to convey enthusiasm for your subject. If you are confident about your comedic skills, make the audience laugh. If not, don't try—as the comedians say, you'll die up there.
- *Expansive gestures* with hands and arms also show enthusiasm. (Nervous movement, such as jingling the change or keys in your pocket, is distracting.)
- Pick up the pace. Most people can listen faster than you can talk, so dragging along is more of a concern than speaking quickly out of nervousness.
- *Walk* across the stage area or toward the audience to emphasize a point as you speak, if it is appropriate, and if you feel comfortable doing it. Do not fall into anyone's lap.

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And now, **perform.** (cont'd)

2. Use your voice.

- *Project* from the diaphragm, to the last row. (Do this even though you have a microphone)
- *Vary the speed* of your presentation. Slow down to emphasize a point.
- *Vary the volume.* While you don't want to shout, increased *volume* conveys enthusiasm, and expert presenters know that a well-timed, audible *whisper* invites close listening.
- *Keep the pitch at mid-level.* Studies show that a lower pitch conveys less energy (Greusel). However, screaming to convey enthusiasm is not recommended. (Remember Howard Dean?)

3. Interact with the audience.

Lectures encourage attention lapses. Any interaction you promote during your presentation improves the chance of the audience actually learning something from you. You could:

- *Ask a leading question*, offering an enticing tidbit or building suspense. You might provide an image or a metaphor to make your idea stick. For example, "This X is like a balloon; it can only hold so much Y, and then it will pop...." (Greusel)
- As you verbalize a thought, speak to one person in the audience, and *make eye contact*. For your next thought, choose a new person to address.
- If you have to point to your slides with the laser beam while you speak... "learn to use the *touch-turn-talk technique*. Your mission is to point and then turn back toward your audience to speak to the *people*, not to the item you are pointing to.... If you learn to point, turn, and talk, you will distinguish yourself from 99 percent of your peers." (Walters and Walters)
- When you are not using your pointer, turn it off.

4. Provide a distinct, memorable ending

Your ending should be "a concise, positively worded, solid conclusion that summarizes and reinforces your key message." (Walters and Walters)

And now, **perform.** (cont'd)

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5. Handle feedback.

The question and answer period is another opportunity to clarify your message and to learn from your listeners.

Questions

- *Listen* to the whole question before you begin answering.
- Then *repeat the question*. This helps to ensure that you understand what is being asked, it helps others who may not have heard the question, and it gives you an extra moment to formulate your answer.
- Next, *answer the question succinctly*, relate it to your *key message* if possible, and then stop talking.
- *If you don't know an answer, say so*. Someone in the audience may be able to help, or you may want to get back to the questioner with more information at a later date.
- If you get a hostile questioner, you and he or she may just have to *agree to disagree*. Say something polite and then say "Let's move on to other questions." (Walters and Walters, p. 99) You can also try "That's an interesting comment," which usually takes the wind out of the questioner.
- *Watch the time*. If someone has a question that requires a lengthy answer, give a brief one and offer to discuss it further with that person later.

Comments

- Affirm that you hear what the person said (whether it's appropriate or not and whether you agree with it or not).
- Record the point, if possible.
- Move on to the next comment or question (see above).
- Conclude as appropriate to the time.

Last But Not Least:

FOCUS!

Throughout your talk and the Q. and A. be present both emotionally and intellectually. Don't think ahead to what you will say next when someone is addressing you. Don't think behind to something that you should have said or phrased differently.

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Words to the wise...what *not* to do!

- **Don't overwhelm with your slides or your speech!** Avoid putting complete sentences or an abundance of details on any one slide. You want the audience to listen to your presentation, not to read it. If you do include a complete sentence or clause, let the audience read it for themselves. What you *should* say is ***something connected to the idea on the slide***. Avoid reading any slide aloud for the audience verbatim. Your best slides will probably be graphs or other illustrations of your research findings. "A few strong points will make a better impression than an endless list of weaker ones...In a patent or a scientific publication, you are expected to provide enough detail so that someone 'skilled in the art' could reproduce your experiment; this is not a requirement or even a desirable goal for speeches. Leave out the detailed technical procedures...Listeners are more impressed by clarity than by technical detail." (Walters and Walters) If your listeners were interested in every technical, they could read your publications. The audience is there because *they want to know something about you*, something about your personal perspective and experience. Focus on your key points and share something of yourself.
- **Don't** start with one or more graphs or pictures that **give away the ending**/your key results. Instead, target your talk. Tell a story.
- While your audience will certainly include professionals with a keen interest in the field, you **don't** want to **patronize** them in your address. You also **don't** want to **overestimate** the audience's familiarity with your topic. Remember how hard you worked to know what you know.
- **Don't keep talking** through the question and answer period. It is better to cut from the body of your talk than it is to pass up the opportunity for discussion.