



Presentation Skills Handout

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5 classic research presentation mistakes

By The Thesis Whisperer

Presentations for a faculty or disciplinary audience are subtly different to those you give at a conference, but not talked about as frequently. These 'internal' presentations are important because they tell your colleagues what kind of researcher you are; it helps you socially and academically to perform well to your peers.

This topic occurred to me as I sat in on a couple of examinations (vivas), completion seminars and a confirmation or two in recent weeks. I have sat through literally hundreds of assessment presentations if you count my years in purgatory architecture school. So here's my top five classic research presentation mistakes, but I'm going to stick with the verbal problems here because there are many great presentations about graphics, such as 'how not to suck at powerpoint' and 'how to make you presentation boring'.

1) TMI

Too much information (TMI) is the most common mistake I see and one I have indulged in a few times myself. I see it most often in completion seminars where the student has a full draft and can no longer see the forest for the trees. You know that you are heading for TMI when you start to feel like you are drowning in facts and figures which don't seem to relate to each other. The presentation can seem full of tangents, where the student veers off course to explain, often in painful detail, definitions, counter arguments, collection problems and the like. It's frustrating to listen to because you feel like the student is never going to get to the point. By the time they actually do, you have lost interest and started thinking earnestly about lunch. A presentation like this is unlikely to make you look like a lightweight, but it can make you look more confused than you are.

2) All theory, no action

It's a difficult line to walk with theory sometimes. Not enough can make your project look lightweight; too much can make it look like you spent 4 years gazing at your navel and not *doing* anything. Recently I watched a creative research viva, which involved some design work along with a theoretical 'exegesis'. The student spent the majority of her presentation explaining the theory behind practice based research in exquisite detail; in fact she did rather a good job of this, but she didn't leave enough time to talk about her project work.

It must have seemed like a good strategy because her examiners were not from the design research field, unfortunately these people had already read her text, which went through much of the same explanation, and the rest of the audience were designers – who already knew the arguments. Instead of reassuring the examiners that her research approach was legitimate, the second lengthy exposition gave the perverse impression that the student was defensive and unsure of herself. I think it's best to keep explanations of theory short and precise, but tell the audience you are happy to address it during question time. It makes you look smarter if you can answer theoretical questions on your feet anyway.

3) Why are we here?

Sometimes students race through an explanation of data without enough lead in for me to understand what the problem was in the first place. Without an explanation – however cursory – of the bigger world in which the research is situated I cannot understand fully why the research matters. A more troubling manifestation of the ‘why are we here?’ problem is when the student that doesn’t tell us what the research means at the end of it – data and interpretations are offered but there’s no sense of what might come next, what use the research could be or how it changes anything in that bigger world beyond the thesis.

Maybe it’s just me, but I like to see that the researcher has some questions remaining, or that there were questions which are raised by doing the research in the first place. Perhaps people leave these out in an effort to make the research seem ‘finished’ or ‘under control’? I’m not sure – but please tell me why I am here because otherwise I could be doing my own work and I will come away from your presentation feeling cranky.

4) Undigested text

Oh boy – where do I start with this one? Reading straight from your paper or thesis is almost always a mistake. Most academic text is not, as they say in the music industry a ‘radio friendly unit shifter’. We all know that what sounds delightfully erudite on the page can come across as pompous out loud... but it’s a trap which so many of us fall into again and again. I’m as guilty as the next person of reading out chunks of written text rather than working on removing the ‘clutter’ for a clearer verbal explanation. Earlier in my career I did it because I was afraid of looking dumb, now it happens when I haven’t taken enough time to prepare my presentation. Someone estimated that a good one hour presentation takes about 30 hours to prepare – they are probably right.

5) Question time = fail

Being able to give a good performance during question time is a vital skill because it shows people what kind of academic you are when you are when you are off script. Unfortunately a lot of academics are old hands at asking tricky questions of research students – and they know all the brutal ones. The most common one in a confirmation presentations is “What is your research question?”. It’s an easy hit because usually the question (if there is one – rather than half a dozen) is so convoluted that it is easy to make fun of or rip to shreds. Sometimes it’s merely the tone in which the question is delivered – of barely concealed derision – which is unnerving, especially to beginners. I think the key is to stay calm and take your time to answer. It can help to write the question on a piece of paper.

So – what presentation mistakes would make it to your list?

Source: <https://thesiswhisperer.com/2010/11/25/5-classic-research-presentation-mistakes/>

What makes a *bad* presentation?

Therefore, what makes a *good* presentation?

Planning Your Presentation

| | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| Presentation Topic: | | |
| Presentation Length: | | |
| Throughline: | | |
| Characteristics of Audience | <i>Size</i> | |
| | <i>Diversity</i> | |
| | <i>Educational Level</i> | |
| | <i>Level of Knowledge of Subject</i> | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| Ideas for an opening/closing 'hook': | | |
| Story/narrative: | <i>Situation</i> | |
| | <i>Complication</i> | |
| | <i>Resolution</i> | |

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Visual Aids/Support Material | <i>PowerPoints</i> | |
| | <i>Handouts</i> | |
| | <i>Others</i> | |
| People to provide feedback: | | |
| | | |
| | | |
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| | | |
| | | |
| Potential Questions | <i>Question</i> | <i>Prepared Answer</i> |
| | | |
| | | |
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| | | |
| | | |
| Take-Aways for audience | | |

Tim Gordon's Presentation

| | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| Presentation Topic: Helping Nemo Find Home | | |
| Presentation Length: 3 minutes | | |
| Throughline: | | |
| Characteristics of Audience | <i>Size</i> | |
| | <i>Diversity</i> | |
| | <i>Educational Level</i> | |
| | <i>Level of Knowledge of Subject</i> | |
| | | |
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| | | |
| Ideas for an opening/closing 'hook': | | |
| Story/narrative: | <i>Situation</i> | |
| | <i>Complication</i> | |
| | <i>Resolution</i> | |

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Visual Aids/Support Material | |
| Take-Aways for audience | |

TED Talk Masters Teach You How To Tell A Story That Actually Means Something

By Chris Anderson

The point of a talk is to say something meaningful," says TED's Chris Anderson. "But it's amazing how many talks never quite do that."

"It happens way too often: You're sitting there in the audience, listening to someone talk, and you know that there is a better and great talk in that person, it's just not the talk he's giving." That's TED's Bruno Giussani, a man who cannot stand seeing potentially great speakers blow their opportunity.

The point of a talk is to say something meaningful. But it's amazing how many talks never quite do that. There are lots of spoken sentences, to be sure. But somehow they leave the audience with nothing they can hold on to. Beautiful slides and a charismatic stage presence are all very well, but if there's no real takeaway, all the speaker has done—at best—is to entertain.

WHAT'S YOUR "THROUGH-LINE"?

The number-one reason for this tragedy is that the speaker never had a proper plan for the talk as a whole. The talk may have been planned bullet point by bullet point, or even sentence by sentence, but no time was actually spent on its overall arc.

If there's no real takeaway, all the speaker has done—at best—is to entertain.

There's a helpful word used to analyze plays, movies, and novels; it applies to talks, too. It's "through-line," the connecting theme that ties together each narrative element. Every talk should have one.

Since your goal is to construct something wondrous inside your listeners' minds, you can think of the through-line as a strong cord or rope onto which you will attach all the elements that are part of the idea you're building.

This doesn't mean every talk can only cover one topic, tell a single story, or just proceed in one direction without diversions. Not at all. It just means that all the pieces need to connect.

Here's the start of a talk thrown together without a through-line:

I want to share with you some experiences I had during my recent trip to Cape Town, and then make a few observations about life on the road . . .

Compare that with:

On my recent trip to Cape Town, I learned something new about strangers—when you can trust them, and when you definitely can't. Let me share with you two very different experiences I had . . .

The first setup might work for your family. But the second, with its through-line visible from the get-go, is far more enticing to a general audience.

HOW TO CRAFT A POWERFUL THROUGH-LINE

A good exercise is to try to encapsulate your through-line in no more than 15 words. And those 15 words need to provide robust content. It's not enough to think of your goal as, "I want to inspire the audience" or "I want to win support for my work." It has to be more focused than that. What is the *precise idea* you want to build inside your listeners? What is their takeaway?

It's also important not to have a through-line that's too predictable or banal, such as "the importance of hard work" or "the four main projects I've been working on." Zzzzz . . . You can do better! Here are the through-lines of some popular TED Talks. Notice that there's an *unexpectedness* incorporated into each of them.

- More choice actually makes us less happy.
- Vulnerability is something to be treasured, not avoided.
- Education's potential is transformed if you focus on the amazing (and hilarious) creativity of kids.
- With body language, you can fake it till you become it.
- A history of the universe in 18 minutes shows a path from chaos to order.
- Terrible city flags can reveal surprising design secrets.
- A ski trek to the South Pole threatened my life and overturned my sense of purpose.
- Let's bring on a quiet revolution—a world redesigned for introverts.
- The combination of three simple technologies creates a mind-blowing sixth sense.
- Online videos can humanize the classroom and revolutionize education.

Barry Schwartz, whose talk is the first one in the list above, on the paradox of choice, is a big believer in the importance of a through-line:

Many speakers have fallen in love with their ideas and find it hard to imagine what is complicated about them to people who are not already immersed. The key is to present just one idea—as thoroughly and completely as you can in the limited time period. What is it that you want your audience to have an unambiguous understanding of after you're done?

The last through-line in the list above is from education reformer Salman Khan. He told me:

There were a lot of really interesting things that Khan Academy had done, but that felt too self-serving. I wanted to share ideas that are bigger, ideas like mastery-based learning and humanizing class time by removing lectures. My advice to speakers would be to look for a single big idea that is larger than you or your organization, but at the same time to leverage your experience to show that it isn't just empty speculation.

Your through-line doesn't have to be as ambitious as those above. But it still should have some kind of intriguing angle. Instead of giving a talk about the importance of hard work, how about speaking on why hard work sometimes fails to achieve true success, and what you can do about that?

Instead of planning to speak about the four main projects you've recently been working on, how about structuring it around just three of the projects that happen to have a surprising connection? In fact, Robin Murphy had exactly that as her through-line when she came to speak at TEDWomen. Here's the opening of her talk:

Robots are quickly becoming first responders at disaster sites, working alongside humans to aid recovery. The involvement of these sophisticated machines has the potential to transform disaster

relief, saving lives and money. I'd like to share with you today three new robots I've worked on that demonstrate this.

Not every talk has to state its through-line explicitly up front like this. There are many other ways to intrigue people and invite them to join you on your journey. But when the audience knows where you're headed, it's much easier for them to follow.

When the audience knows where you're headed, it's much easier for them to follow.

Think of your talk as a journey that the speaker and the audience take together, with the speaker as the guide. But if you, the speaker, want the audience to come with you, you probably need to give them a hint of where you're going. And then you need to be sure that each step of the journey helps get you there.

In this journey metaphor, the through-line traces the path that the journey takes. It ensures that there are no impossible leaps, and that by the end of the talk, the speaker and audience have arrived together at a satisfying destination.

Many people approach a talk thinking they'll just outline their work or describe their organization or explore an issue. That's not a great plan. Without a powerful through-line, a talk is likely to end up unfocused and without much impact.

This article is adapted from TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking © 2016 by Chris Anderson. Reproduced by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. All rights reserved.

Source: <https://www.fastcompany.com/3059547/ted-talk-masters-teach-you-how-to-tell-a-story-that-actually-means-something>

Stop waffling! Five steps to a successful research ‘Elevator Pitch’

By Evonne Miller for The Supervision Whisperers

This post is by Associate Professor Evonne Miller, Interim Director of QUT Design Lab, Queensland University of Technology.

I can't be the only thesis supervisor who, listening to their (or others) student present at a seminar, conference or just sharing their research in conversation with others, has mentally (and maybe also physically) sighed in disbelief and disappointment. The thought: are you kidding me, stop waffling and please, for the love of everything, just stop talking' races through your head. Such wonderful, ground breaking research methodology, novel findings and amazing impact .. and your student has lost their audience, as they describe the most irrelevant, boring aspects of their research. As best-selling novelist CJ Lyons notes, who would want to know more or read something when the person who "ate / slept / breathed it for a year or more can't explain" it in a clear and compelling manner.

And, if I am honest, I am guilty of this too.

At times, especially when I have not done the hard yards in terms of preparation, my own verbal communication can be less than succinct. If I do not prepare, or at least think about the key points I want to make and the core take home message, I can do a poor job of selling the value and impact of my research (and of selling myself – a critical concern for our thesis students who are looking for employment post their PhD).

So, how can we improve?

How can we – and our students – better communicate our research?

Developing a polished 'EP' – ELEVATOR PITCH – can help us build connections and our reputation, so it is worth putting some time and thought into how you communicate your research IN A SHORT TIME FRAME. Below, I outline my '5-S' approach to EP for researchers... maybe set your PhD student the task of crafting and presenting an EP at your next meeting (or do it yourself! In many ways, this is an informal version of the annual '3 minute thesis competition', so look at those for guidance).

The 5'S approach to a research 'Elevator Pitch'

1. 'So-What'?
2. Skip the Jargon
3. Spiel – Short & Sweet
4. Smile
5. Shut Up!

1. The 'So-What' Factor

At the outset, it is critically important to know what makes you – and your research – unique. That is your 'so-what' factor, and it is central to the EP. Spend some time reflecting on why your research is

important, and what aspects/key messages might resonate best with different audiences (eg industry, fellow academics, communities). Over time, you will develop different spiels for different audiences, differently emphasising your unique recruitment, techniques, analysis or approach to engagement and dissemination. The best, most engaging and memorable 'elevator pitches' are those that convey the excitement, energy and interest the researcher has for their research – so be authentic and share your passion

2. Skip the jargon!

Jargon is everywhere, and while helpful at times in terms of facilitating quick, shorthand communication, it does NOT belong in your EP. No acronyms. Simple language.

3. Spiel – short and sweet

Your spiel has to roll smoothly off your tongue; don't think that because you are loving and breathing your research you can explain it concisely and clearly in a few minutes. Trust me: crafting a short, clear and compelling narrative requires preparation and a degree of memorisation – start by developing and learning a few key phrases.

Get comfortable with your spiel: practice it – in the car, in the shower, when out walking / running (yes, people will look at you weirdly when you are talking to yourself – but what's new?). Asking a friend or family member to give feedback is great; also, use technology – a great way to get a sense of how fluent you are (and where you stumble or ramble) is to record yourself on your iPad/phone. Develop and memorise a few key phrases that describe what makes you and your research unique – but remember to remain natural and try to not sound robotic!

4. Smile

You want to come across as likeable, warm and approachable – even if that is not your personality, no one will know – if you smile. Simply smiling is a great way to engage people; try it!

5. Shut up

Academics can waffle. As I write this, I am sitting in all-faculty meeting – there are a few presenters who could have done with this advice. Keep it short, shut up and leave the audience wanting more.

I hope the '5 S's' approach might help you and your students craft better 'EP'. I also highly recommend attending and watching (there are many online) the annual '3 minute thesis competition', which is an extended version of an EP in a research context.

Source: <https://thesupervisionwhisperers.wordpress.com/2018/01/22/stop-waffling-five-steps-to-a-successful-research-elevator-pitch/>

A Simple Plot for a Literature Review

By Academic Muse

There's an easy way to chart your course through it.

There are two things you need any time you are stuck in writing. You need to set the course and steady the course.

If you are stuck while writing a literature review,

then each of these things— set the course and steady the course— have particular ways in which you can do them easily,

and each have their particular threats to doing so.

I think you'll recognize the threats, so let's start there, and then get to what you can do to quickly set the course and steady the course for a lit review.

Threat number one: Where do I start, what needs to be there?

When you are at the drafting stage and it's time for the little song and dance we call the literature review, often you can get stuck because there are a whole bunch of things you could bring up in an infinite variety of orders.

Your knowledge is here in your head more or less simultaneously. How do you get it out in a legible line on the page?

What choice do you have besides just going in historical order? What if that's not interesting enough for your genre, discipline, or most importantly, for yourself?

And the answer is:

Think Story.

And by story I mean plot.

Even if we go in historical order, that is not a story or a plot. That's just sequence and it doesn't communicate enough. A good literature review or review article, you'll notice, may sometimes proceed in historical order, but it's also communicating something far more, and that far more is a story.

So think in the elements of story plotting and you'll know how to proceed.

And boiler plate story plotting works great. Remember you want simple and easy, because you are stuck. If you are not stuck, then just go for it. If you are stuck, find your protagonist, their goal, the conflict they face and the obstacles or even mustachioed villains they face.

Here's how things move in a boilerplate plot.

Joe Sloppyburger lives his life, wistful about his past rockstar dreams, working in the post office every day, trying to support his family. He hates to slog through life sometimes, hates a particular dog on his route, and wants to get to a point where he can pay the bills and even have some money for his kids to go to college.

Then one day the dog he hates speaks to him as he drops an Amazon envelope into the door slot of it's house, and offers him a deal. I'll give you stardom if you give me your soul. And Joe, thinking of his children and how they deserve a stable future, says yes.

But then, as his rock career picks up, he starts having doubts about whether it's really happening, or he is just imagining it and instead playing a broken guitar in the park with no pants on. Which is real and which isn't?

He tries this, that, and the other thing to find out. He's got to figure it out so that he can secure his children's future...

I know you are dying to know what happens next, but let's get back to you!

So...the elements of this plot are:

Here's how it was or is,

Then something comes along and changes everything

If you respond to that in this way, that problem comes up

This problem is a serious conflict

There are ways to try to overcome it

And then new possibilities (or in the case of boiler plate, an ending) are arrived at.

Character– Conflict– Resolution.

So how would this work in a literature review?

The theme, topic, question, issue is your character.

But there are problems for your hero. Problems in the world, in the data, in challenges from other intellectual directions, or a challenge you pose to it.

There have been attempts to answer these challenges.

But they revealed new challenges.

And there were responses to those challenges.

And they revealed new possibilities or, in some genres, but not many, new conclusions.

The number of steps challenges confronting your protagonist can vary, but the basic structure is

Character — Conflict — Resolution.

You are telling a story that moves from an unsatisfactory and unstable status quo to a new realm of possibility.

So ask yourself, what is your protagonist?

It could be more or less your goal, if the literature review is heading toward some argument about the next phase. Or it could be simply “understanding x” and the challenges and attempts along the way, always thwarted somehow.

In an article I recently read, the protagonist was: a mode of anthropological ethnography that is based more in sense experience and less in textual and conceptual knowledge.

That is the hero of the literature review. And it starts in the post office job of an interpretive anthropology that depends primarily on concepts told to ethnographers and unable to process bodily or embodied meanings.

It wants more, but can't get that, in its current situation. But then it meets phenomenology. And certain authors start trying out this new way.

But there are problems with that, and subsequent authors try this. Another group tries that.

But “I” think this is the way, and here's what we face, what we might gain, and what needs still to be resolved.

There is a hero, there's a conflict, and this becomes a story that has its redemption, even if only partial and temporary at the end.

It's like characters and challenges, but its ideas, approaches.

Write your blockbuster thriller redemption STORY.

Most of the people having an easy time with literature reviews are just intuitively in touch with a sense of story.

Or even if it once was easy, but now you are stuck, chances are you intuitively knew your story before and right now the only problem now is that you need your sense of plot.

So identify your hero, the conflict, and the resolution or next stage. That will set your course!

Source: <https://academicmuse.org/simple-plot-literature-review/>

11 Tips For Calming Your Nerves Before A Big Presentation

By Jacqueline Smith for Business Insider

At age 15, Darlene Price had to give her very first speech.

She was presenting an oral book report on "[Great Expectations](#)" to Mrs. Weaver's tenth grade English class. She was nervous and could feel her hands shaking, heart racing, knees knocking, and palms sweating. As she reached the front of the room and turned to face her 33 classmates, she froze.

Moments passed, snickers erupted, and Mrs. Weaver asked 15-year-old Price to begin her presentation.

As soon as she made eye contact with the audience, all of the nervous tics disappeared — not because a wave of calm came over her, but rather because she *fainted*.

Three decades later, Price is a communications coach, [author](#), and the president of [Well Said, Inc.](#), an award-winning company that teaches professionals how to speak with confidence, clarity, and credibility. And, she jokes, she "can finally stay vertical during a speech."

Price says her high school experience taught her this: Effective public speaking is not about getting rid of the nerves. It's about managing them so that you're able to effectively communicate and connect with the audience.

She's also learned that what happened to her in tenth grade isn't so uncommon.

In fact, surveys about our human fears commonly show fear of public speaking toward the top of the list. "Though statistics vary on the exact percentages, it's safe to say *most* of us get nervous before a public speaking engagement," she explains. "As a speaker facing an audience, we often fear failure, criticism, judgment, embarrassment, comparison, or rejection."

Physically, nervousness and anxiety may cause an increased heart rate, a queasy stomach, sweating, shaking, shortness of breath, weak knees, dry mouth, a quivering voice, blushing, muscle tension, headache, stuttering, lightheadedness, or, even fainting — which Price learned the hard way.

"Despite the scary list of symptoms, the good news is this: There are no negative consequences from *feeling* nervous; the trick is to avoid *showing* it." An audience cannot see how you feel; they only see how you look and act. Therefore, when you learn how to look and act calm, confident, and composed on the outside, that's what the audience perceives and believes.

Here are 11 tips for calming your nerves before a big presentation:

Prepare. Research your subject, craft your content, and know your material well in advance, Price suggests. "Just remember the six Ps: Proper Preparation and Practice Prevent Poor Performance," she says. "Procrastination only leads to increased anxiety."

Know your venue. "Don't wait until you arrive onstage to realize that there's a post blocking your view of half the audience, or that they will be serving dinner *while* you speak, or that there are problems with the audio visual equipment provided," says [public speaking coach](#) Ian Cunliffe. Research the venue, become familiar with the schedule of events surrounding your presentation, and test the equipment beforehand.

Practice. There's no better way to calm your nerves and ensure a winning presentation than to rehearse aloud, with an audience if possible. "Ideally, record the rehearsal and review your performance," Price says.

Visualize your success. Sports psychologists have proven that an athlete's ability to vividly visualize his or her success creates a higher win rate, she says. "Before your next presentation, mentally walk yourself through the presentation. Picture yourself speaking with confidence and poise; see your audience responding positively."

Practice positive self-talk. "Replace negative thinking with affirmations, which comes from the Latin *affirmare*, 'to make steady or strengthen,'" Price says. "Say to yourself, 'I am a dynamic speaker.' 'I am enthusiastic and engaging.' 'I am prepared and confident.'" As Henry Ford once said, "Whether you think you can or think you can't — you are right."

Know your audience. "Do a little research beforehand in order to find out what your audience is hoping to gain from hearing you speak," says Cunliffe. "Arrive early and talk to a few individual audience members about their needs, that way you'll have insider information and friendly faces that you can focus on when you take the stage."

Price agrees. "Conversation helps relax your nerves, creates a bond with your audience, and sets the stage for 'personable' speaking versus 'public' speaking."

Exercise lightly and breathe deeply before you speak. Find a private area beforehand where you can do some light stretching or a few knee-bends. Another option is to take a brisk walk down the hall and back. "This rids the body of excess energy," she explains. "In addition, take several deep breaths. Inhale through the nose on a slow count of three; and exhale through the mouth on a slow count of three. Deep breathing floods the brain with oxygen."

Memorize your opening. The beginning of the presentation often carries a rush of adrenalin. Learn your first few sentences so well you don't have to think about it. "This empowers you to start strong and make a confident first impression despite nervousness," says Price.

Claim the three "audience truths." One: They believe you're the expert, so don't tell them otherwise. Two: They want you to succeed, so they're on your side. Three: They won't know when you make a mistake, so don't announce it.

Smile. Sincere smiling emits chemicals in the brain that calms the nerves and promotes a sense of well being, she says. "Plus, it shows your audience that you're happy to see them and enthusiastic about the message."

Realize you don't look as nervous as you feel. Presenters who review their videotaped presentations almost always say, "Wow, I don't look nearly as nervous as I felt." "Remember, your audience does not see how you *feel* inside; they only see how you *look and act* on the outside," Price says.

As a speaker, when you're calm and confident going into a presentation (or at least look as though you are) you reap a multitude of benefits, namely believability, likeability, and visibility. "When you're able to manage your nerves, take the mic, and connect with an audience, you greatly increase your visibility and career opportunities in the workplace," Price concludes.

Source: <http://www.businessinsider.com/tips-for-calming-nerves-before-a-speech-2014-6?IR=T>

Responding to questions effectively

The aim of this guide is to give you some practical strategies for handling and responding to questions during or at the end of an oral presentation.

Other useful guides from Learning Development: *Planning an effective presentation*

Introduction

Many presenters fear the question and answer session at the end of their presentation because they feel that they are losing control of their input (speaking seems so much safer). However, it is important to remember that the questions are a vital part of the presentation for the whole audience as they allow for clarification and consolidation of learning. The presenter can enhance the effectiveness of the question and answer session by treating it as a formal part of the presentation that requires as much careful planning and control as the delivery of the core material.

Plan to take control

The background work that you undertook whilst planning your presentation is the key to handling questions effectively. If you have defined a precise focus for your presentation and have explored this thoroughly in your background research and planning, you are more likely to be able to respond to questions with precise answers. If you have been unfocused in your preparatory work, this will come across in the way you answer questions.

When planning your presentation, you will need to:

- identify when questions will be invited in your talk and plan to inform your audience of this;
- plan to leave plenty of time for questions so that the audience doesn't feel rushed (this might involve having to reduce the content of your talk);
- prepare prompts for questions that are open and straightforward: *"That's the end of my presentation. I would now like to stop and take questions from the audience"*.

As a further part of your planning you may decide to:

- define the topics for discussion: *"Have you any questions on the four principles that I've outlined?"*;
- avoid answering questions that fall outside of the remit of your talk: *"I'm afraid that really falls outside of my objectives for today's presentation. Perhaps we can resume discussion of that particular point later?"*

Responding to questions

One of the main problems with question and answer sessions is that the presenter's nerves frequently force an inappropriate response. This could be because a question has been misinterpreted or that only key words from the question have been heard rather than the full content. The following steps will help you respond more effectively to questions from your audience.

Step one: listen

It is important to listen to all parts of a question before drawing premature conclusions about your 'best' response. Frequently questions can change direction at the last moment, particularly if the questioner is thinking on her/his feet. This can throw you if you have already started to leaf through your material for the 'appropriate' response. Remember that questioners will frequently try to make a point whilst asking their question: "*Surely a more meaningful interpretation of X is that it?*" It is therefore important to both hear the content of the question and try to decipher the questioner's intention.

Step two: understand

If you are worried that you haven't understood a question, clarify the area of enquiry *before* going any further. Check for direct confirmation by paraphrasing the question back to the questioner "*You want me to explain the process of ...?*" or check that your reply will be heading in the right direction "*Do you mean in relation to factor X or factor Y?*".

Step three: communicate and involve

It is important to remember that even though you are taking a question from one member of the audience, as a presenter, you are still responsible for the interest and engagement of the other audience members. This is particularly important in large groups as the audience will become bored if the presentation descends into a series of one-to-one discussions. To involve the rest of the audience (and avoid potentially extended dialogue with the questioner) make sure the whole audience has heard and understood the question by outlining the area of enquiry: "*I've been asked to outline my thinking behind ...*"

Step four: respond

When you reply to a question, direct your answer to both the questioner and other members of the audience. Try to keep your responses as focused as possible. This will help keep them brief and preserve space for other questions. To avoid going into too much detail, stop and check back with the questioner to see if you have answered his/her query: "*Does that explain why we chose to ...?*".

Allow follow-up questions

A particularly effective technique encourages your audience to ask questions after the event has finished through email discussion or telephone comments. This shows a particularly high level of respect for your audience's ideas and implies that the topic still has much further scope for enquiry.

Things to avoid

When handling questions and answers, you will still need to be as polished and professional as you have been for the main delivery of your presentation. There are some common dangers that are useful to avoid.

Answering the question you wished you'd been asked

A common trick played by politicians, this strategy ignores the precise nature of the question and uses a predetermined answer to the broad topic area. If handled ineptly, this technique is very obvious to the audience and frustrating to the questioner.

Making a second 'mini' presentation

This is the process whereby you make a lengthy response, including all the information you'd left out in planning the main presentation. Remember, you left that information out for a reason! Your unplanned response will be unstructured and rambling, so keep things focused and brief (check the time as you respond). You can always offer to forward lengthy detail after the event.

Passing the blame

"*That wasn't my idea, my supervisor did the preliminary work, I've simply attempted to ...*" Passing the blame to others comes across as weak and evasive. If an idea from the audience is a good one, acknowledge its value. If it isn't, make a polite rebuttal and move on.

Defensive answers

Occasionally, questions can really put you on the spot, but it is important to remain calm and in control. An aggressive or defensive reply will be seen as weakness on your part and will spoil the effect of an otherwise successful presentation.

Handling difficult questions

It is important not to start responding to a difficult question before you have thought about the answer. Repeating the question and asking for clarification will help create some space for your thoughts.

Sometimes you will need to think about a question for a moment before responding. You may be able to buy a little bit of thinking time to help focus your response. Useful strategies include searching for an appropriate visual aid to help focus your response or simply pausing for a moment or two to think. For even more time, suggest that you'll come back to the topic later (but don't forget to do this).

Sometimes questions are too difficult to answer. Don't worry about admitting that you don't know something or haven't considered an alternative approach. An enthusiastic "*That's an interesting idea, I'd not thought of that*" is much more positive than a mumbled "*I don't know*". Remember that a presentation is a two-way process and it is important to show that you are learning from your audience as well.

Occasionally, questions will fall outside of the remit of your talk and it would be too much of a diversion to tackle them in front of the whole audience. Respond positively to any such questions and suggest that they best be tackled by a quick chat after the event.

Finally, you can come across a questioner who disagrees strongly with your argument. Although this can feel very awkward, remember that you are still responsible for the whole audience and that you cannot allocate all of your question time to one individual (no matter how passionate her/his views). If you feel that you have answered the initial question, announce that you will move on and suggest that you might continue discussion after the presentation. If the questioner persists, use an assertiveness technique called 'broken record' to assert your position calmly: "*I'm afraid I need to move on ... I do need to move on ... I would like to move on now.*" Your final sanction is to take another question or even close the presentation.

Summary

Question and answer sessions are important elements of any presentation. Plan for the question session by determining when you will be inviting questions and specifying any themes that you would like questioners to pursue. Clearly announce the start of your question session and involve all audience members in the way that you repeat and respond to questions. Make sure you respond to the question being asked and have practiced methods for dealing with awkward questions. Avoid common pitfalls by responding to questions positively and enthusiastically whilst keeping your answers brief and focused. Above all, don't be afraid to admit what you don't know: it is better to admit the limits of your knowledge than attempt an uninformed answer.

This study guide is one of a series produced by Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills. You can find us on the 2nd floor of the David Wilson Library

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10 tips on how to make slides that communicate your idea, from TED's in-house expert

Aaron Weyenberg is the master of slide decks. Our UX Lead creates Keynote presentations that are both slick and charming—the kind that pull you in and keep you captivated, but in an understated way that helps you focus on what's actually being said. He does this for his own presentations and for lots of other folks in the office. Yes, his coworkers ask him to design their slides, because he's just that good.

We asked Aaron to bottle his Keynote mojo so that others could benefit from it. Here, 10 tips for making an effective slide deck, split into two parts: the big, overarching goals, and the little tips and tricks that make your presentation sing.

The big picture...

1. **Think about your slides *last*.** Building your slides should be the tail end of developing your presentation. Think about your main message, structure its supporting points, practice it and time it—and then start thinking about your slides. The presentation needs to stand on its own; the slides are just something you layer over it to enhance the listener experience. Too often, I see slide decks that feel more like presenter notes, but I think it's far more effective when the slides are for the audience to give them a visual experience that adds to the words.
2. **Create a consistent look and feel.** In a good slide deck, each slide feels like part of the same story. That means using the same or related typography, colors and imagery across all your slides. Using pre-built master slides can be a good way to do that, but it can feel restrictive and lead to me-too decks. I like to create a few slides to hold sample graphic elements and type, then copy what I need from those slides as I go.
3. **Think about topic transitions.** It can be easy to go too far in the direction of consistency, though. You don't want each slide to look exactly the same. I like to create one style for the slides that are the meat of what I'm saying, and then another style for the transitions between topics. For example, if my general slides have a dark background with light text, I'll try transition slides that have a light background with dark text. That way they feel like part of the same family, but the presentation has texture—and the audience gets a visual cue that we're moving onto a new topic.
4. **With text, less is almost always more.** One thing to avoid—slides with a lot of text, especially if it's a repeat of what you're saying out loud. It's like if you give a paper handout in a meeting—everyone's head goes down and they read, rather than staying heads-up and listening. If there are a lot of words on your slide, you're asking your audience to split their attention between what they're reading and what they're hearing. That's really hard for a brain to do, and it compromises the effectiveness of both your slide text and your spoken words. If you can't avoid having text-y slides, try to progressively reveal text (like unveiling bullet points one by one) as you need it.
5. **Use photos that enhance meaning.** I love using simple, punchy photos in presentations, because they help what you're saying resonate in your audience's mind without pulling their attention from your spoken words. Look for photos that (1) speak strongly to the concept

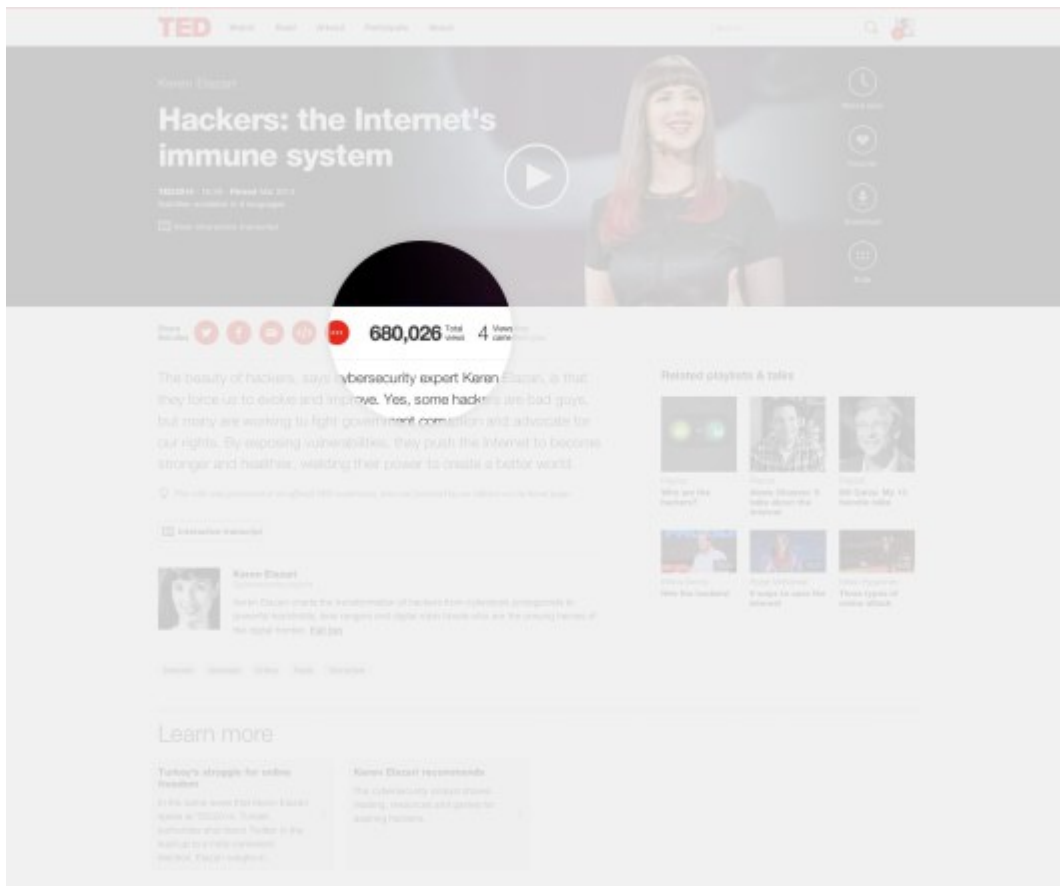
you're talking about and (2) aren't compositionally complex. Your photo could be a metaphor or something more literal, but it should be clear why the audience is looking at it, and why it's paired with what you're saying. For example, I recently used the image above—a photo of a container ship about to tip over (it eventually sank)—to lead off a co-worker's deck about failure preparation. And below is another example of a photo I used in a deck to talk about the launch of [the new TED.com](#). The point I was making was that a launch isn't the end of a project—it's the beginning of something new. We'll learn, adapt, change and grow.

And now some tactical tips...

1. **Go easy on the effects and transitions.** Keynote and Powerpoint come with a lot of effects and transitions. In my opinion, most of these don't do much to enhance the audience experience. At worst, they subtly suggest that the content of your slides is so uninteresting that a page flip or droplet transition will snap the audience out of their lethargy. If you must use them, use the most subtle ones, and keep it consistent.
2. **Use masking to direct attention in images.** If you want to point something out in a photo, you could use a big arrow. Or you could do what I call a dupe-and-mask. I do this a lot when showing new page designs, particularly when I don't want the audience to see the whole design until I'm finished talking about individual components of it. Here's the original image.



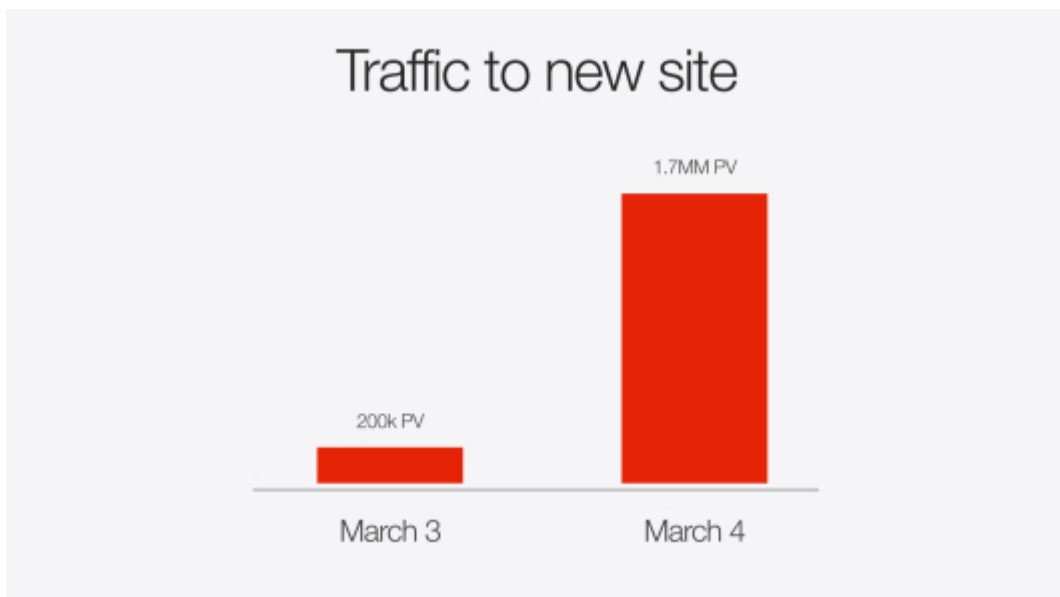
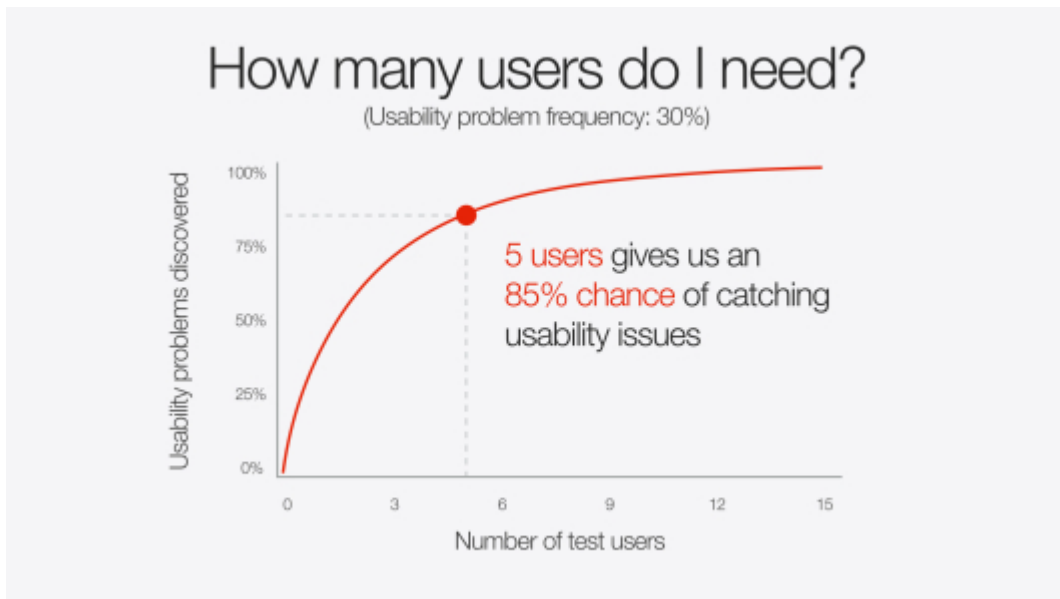
Here's the process for masking it. (1) Set the image transparency to something less than 100. (2) Duplicate that image so there is one directly over the top of the other. (3) Set the dup'd image transparency back to 100. and (4) [Follow the technique here](#) to mask the dup'd image. You'll end up with something that looks like this.



You

can use this technique to call out anything you want in a screenshot. A single word, a photo, a section of content—whatever you want your audience to focus on.

3. **Try panning large images.** Often, I want to show screen shot of an entire web page in my presentations. There's a great [Chrome extension](#) to capture these—but these images are oftentimes much longer than the canvas size of the presentation. Rather than scaling the image to an illegible size, or cropping it, you can pan it vertically as you talk about it. In Keynote, this is done with a Move effect, which you can apply from an object's action panel.
4. **For video, don't use autoplay.** It's super easy to insert video in Keynote and Powerpoint—you just drag a Quicktime file onto the slide. And when you advance the deck to the slide with the video that autoplays, sometimes it can take a moment for the machine to actually start playing it. So often I've seen presenters click again in an attempt to start the video during this delay, causing the deck to go to the next slide. Instead, set the video to click to play. That way you have more predictable control over the video start time, and even select a poster frame to show before starting.
5. **Reproduce simple charts and graphs.** Dropping an image of a chart into a presentation is fine, but it almost always disrupts the feel of a deck in unsightly fashion. If the graph data is simple enough (and you have some extra time) there's a way to make it much more easy on the eyes. You could redraw it in the native presentation application. That sounds like needless work, and it might be for your purposes, but it can really make your presentation feel consistent and thought-through, of one flavor from soup to nuts. You'll have control over colors, typography, and more. Here are some examples.



Lastly, I'd love to leave you with a couple book recommendations. The first is ***Resonate***, by Nancy Duarte. It's not so much about slides, but about public speaking in general – which is the foundation for any presentation, regardless of how great your slides are. In it, she breaks down the anatomy of what makes a great presentation, how to establish a central message and structure your talk, and more. (One of her case studies comes from **Benjamin Zander's charming TED Talk** about classical music, a talk that captivated the audience from start to finish.) Think of this as prerequisite reading for my second recommendation, also by Duarte: ***Slide:ology***. This is more focused on presentation visuals and slides.

Happy slide-making.

Source: https://blog.ted.com/10-tips-for-better-slide-decks/?utm_campaign=social&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_content=ted-blog&utm_term=business

Now It's Time to Practice