

Presentation skills

When talking about presentations, most of us will immediately think of what has become famous under the brand of PowerPoint. But such tools only came into existence some 20 years ago, and the art of presentation is much older. It is important to remember that your skills are decisive, not the tools you use, and that the first thing when preparing a presentation is to think about ideas, not icons.

Six principles for a good presentation

The following six principles, first framed by two educationists,¹ form an acronym of SUCCESS. They can help your ideas to be remembered and to stick in people's minds. Under these principles, a good presentation should be:

Simple. If everything is important then nothing is important. If everything has priority then nothing has priority. Concentrate on the idea rather than on details and try to give essential meanings rather than all-embracing explanations.

Unexpected. You can get people's interest by violating their expectations. Surprise people and stimulate their curiosity by posing questions or opening up holes in their knowledge. Then fill the holes with your answers to the puzzle or, even better, guide them so they can find answers for themselves.

Concrete. Use a lively diction and give real examples to illustrate abstractions. Speak of concrete issues, not of vague notions. Proverbs are good at reducing abstract concepts to concrete, simple, but powerful (and memorable) language.

Credible. If you are famous in your field, you may have built-in credibility. Most of us, however, do not have that kind of credibility, so we can only reach for data to support our claims. But statistics are not inherently helpful. To be credible, your presentation must, above all, be coherent and plausible as a whole.

Emotional. People are emotional beings, and facts will best stick in mind when emotionally fortified – if people can feel something about them. Images, of course, can be a good way to have audiences not only understand your point but also feel it and get an emotional connection to your idea.

Finally, a good presentation should tell a **story**. In the best case, you will be able to refer to a story already known and anchored in collective memory. Religion, propaganda and advertising have always made use of such universal narratives we carry about, not always honestly so. But they are very effective, and a good presentation should give a story, if an underlying story can be found.

¹ Heath, Chip & Heath, Dan (2007): Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die. Random House, New York.

The receptivity problem

Listening to an oral presentation is much more difficult than reading because information must instantly be taken in with no possibility of pausing or paging back.

Be aware that people hardly listen more than half of the time and later will remember only a fraction of what they've heard (some people say 10% versus 50% when reading). That means that your **window of effective communication** can be as small as 5% of your total presentation time.

DESIGN CAN HELP PEOPLE LISTEN

Faced with the above constraint, you can still make maximum use of your audience's receptivity.

- **Organise** your presentation and give your listeners a road map of what you are planning to deal with and how you will get there.
- **Visualise** facts, by means of pictorial representation or metaphorically – by giving examples and similes.
- **Repeat** important points. Repetition promotes recognition. This is important with the spoken word because it is so volatile.

Computer-aided presentations

If you are bound to use presentation software, here are some instructions on how to use it effectively and avoid the most common mistakes made about these programs.

DO NOT READ YOUR TEXT TO THE AUDIENCE

The most boring presentation is the one displaying a lot of text the presenter reads aloud. It will cause the audience to get both **out of sync** (because they can read ahead faster than the presenter) and **bored** (because they will always know what the presenter will say in some seconds' time).

Your slides should do no more than **summarise** your most important points in a very terse way and give **visual aids** supplementing your speech. Imagine them as road signs that will guide your audience. It is natural that a road sign will not elaborate on the beauty of the landscape. It is for you as a speaker to do so.

HOW TO DESIGN GOOD SLIDES

Here are some more rules on how to design the units of a computer-based presentation, usually referred to as slides.

- Use slides to **support** your communication objective and enhance your verbal message, not to give additional information that will detract from it.
- Use slides to **complement** your message in a way only visuals can, not to repeat the words you are saying.
- Focus on **one idea** per slide.

- Allow for **two minutes** per slide at least to let the idea sink in, supported by your speech.
- Confine yourself to no more than **ten lines of ten words** of text on each slide.
- Use **fonts large enough** to be legible from the last row. A good rule of thumb is 30 pt for headlines and 20 pt with regular text, although the actual size of text on your screen depends on a lot of other factors.
- Do **not use facsimiles** to be read by the audience. They are not usually legible from a spectator's distance.
- **Eliminate** all unnecessary information and clutter that does not directly serve your purpose.
- Set the tone and emotional content of verbal messages using **colours and images**.