

10 Tips for a Perfect Presentation



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For many people, giving presentations can be a daunting and unpleasant task. Surveys about our biggest fears frequently show fear of public speaking at the top of the list, above spiders or even death. However, it doesn't have to be such an unnerving experience. With a bit of practice and guidance it's easy to improve your presentation skills and deliver a good performance.

In the next ten chapters I've collected a number of tips and best practices, from building up your speech to how to deal with question and answer sessions, to help you create a well-structured, engaging presentation your audience will remember a long time after your speech. If you follow these tips and remember to use them when preparing for a presentation, you'll be one step closer to becoming a great presenter and leaving a lasting impression on your audience.

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1. How to Create the Perfect Structure for Your Presentation

In the summer of 2013, the world celebrated the 50th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington, and Martin Luther King Jr's famous 'I Have a Dream' speech. With all the televised coverage of it, as well as special commemorative programmes just about it, what can we learn from this about making speeches, public speaking and delivering presentations?

There are so many areas to learn from, such as his clear passion for the topic, the way that he used imagery that people could relate to (a cheque being returned 'Insufficient Funds' being a great example), but the one that I think people can learn from the most is not even that apparent if you just watch the speech. It is something that you only pick up if you study the subject a bit. And what is that area? The fact that he did not plan to say what he did. He changed as he gave the speech.

So, is my lesson that you need to be flexible, and be able to react to your audience? That is always a good trait, but still not what I am talking about.

Studying King's speeches and life you will find that he created little "blocks". They might have been a paragraph long, or maybe a few paragraphs. But these were blocks that he had memorised, and used repeatedly, whenever he found it appropriate. It had been well written and over constant use, repeatedly honed and improved.

The block about his dream had not been intended to be in his speech that day. All the speeches had to be submitted in advance, and vetted. We know this because there had been stand-offs about the wording one of the other speakers was to use that day. So on that famous day in August 1963, he started with his planned speech.



As the crowd responded to him though, he felt the need to change. And he could change, because he knew that he had the material. He had all of these blocks that he had written over the years, and could choose from what was most appropriate. He chose the dream block, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The night before King died, in 1968, he delivered another speech that has become one of the most popular of his speeches. He spoke about having been to the mountaintop, and seen the Promised Land on the other side.

He talks about maybe not getting there with everybody else, but at least he has seen it. Many people talk about how prophetic this speech was, given just the day before he was shot. The fact is that he had delivered that same block many times before- it was one of his many blocks!

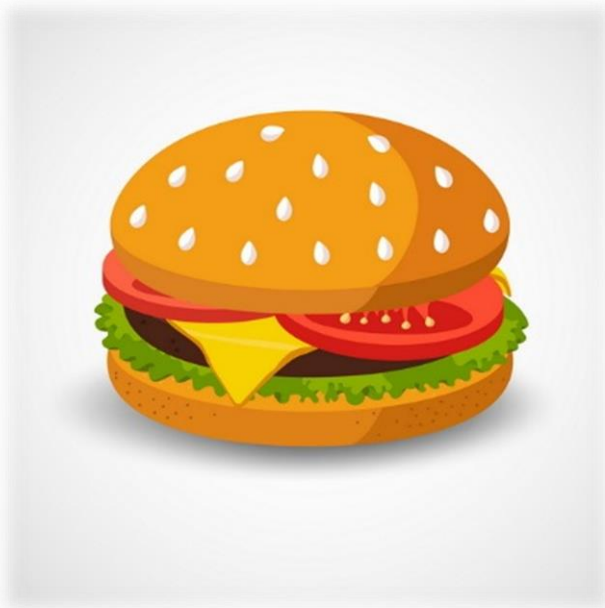
So, a lesson to learn from Dr Martin Luther King Jr is that you should prepare little blocks that you have memorised, so that if you do need to be flexible, you already have the capacity to do so.

If you are in sales, your “elevator pitch” might be one such little block. If your speech or presentation requires asking for some sort of action, whether it be people raise their hands, go up to the platform, fill out a form, or any other action, have that little block down pat. Then, as you change the content of your talk to different audiences, you can still use the same block for a call to action. Dr King wanted you to dream with him. I suggest that you prepare like him!

2. How to Create a Great Presentation

First impressions count

Have you ever seen a presentation, or a speech, that you have never forgotten? I have seen literally hundreds, if not thousands, of “talks” in my life. Many were in a religious environment as I was growing up, but others have been professionally oriented, either sales demonstrations, new product demonstrations etc. And in those hundreds or thousands, there are maybe a handful that stand out, and twenty or more years later, I can still remember what was being spoken about. How did the speaker manage to make such an impression?



I remember one minister at a church that I went to while on holiday, where he compared being a good person to building a quality hamburger. He compared each ingredient to a personality trait, and he had the ingredients with him as he spoke.

He had lots of mince, and masses of rolls and tomatoes etc., and as he was talking he was cutting the ingredients and showing the audience. He separated the mince into patties and piled them on a plate. After the service, the entire congregation had a BBQ and had burgers.

I bet almost everybody there that day can still remember his points! And that was in 1998.

How to get people to remember you

Just like that minister, let me build a hamburger for you to remember how to grab an audience’s attention, and make them remember you and what you said.

Just like the roll in a hamburger, you need something that will hold everything together. Have you given your presentation a structure? The structure of your presentation usually covers a number of things, but you will generally have an introduction, the content of your talk, and then a summary. Do you actually know what the aim of your presentation is? If you do not, you are going to struggle to put the correct content together, and then summarise it well. The meat patty itself is the content of your talk. Is it tasty? Have you chosen interesting content?

The first time I ever spoke in public was as a 12 year old. We had a school public speaking competition, and you could choose your own subject. I already loved sport, and as my topic chose “*The Changing Shape of the Formula 1 Car.*” I think I was the only person interested.

Even my friends did not want to listen, let alone everybody else in the school. So choose your content well. And if you are going to talk about the features of anything, just like in sales, explain what the benefit of those features are.

Is the patty good quality meat, or is it full of fat? Have you put things in that you can leave out, that is not adding to the presentation? Good quality, tasty meat is what makes a good burger, and likewise a good presentation. Have you done proper research so that your content is up to date, correct, and interesting, and most importantly, relevant?

Just like cooking your patty, timing is everything. People cook for personal preference, but overcooking your meat will ruin it for anybody. Similarly, you need to make sure you do not overstay your welcome. This might cause people to remember you, but in a bad way. You do not want to be the person that gets escorted from the stage as you are cutting into somebody else’s talk time. Time it right, and people will feel that it was just right: not too long, but not too short either.

Let’s include the lettuce, tomatoes and pickles, etc. into one thing, and call it the garnishing. The garnishing is the symbols that you choose to use. The best way to make your talk resonate with an audience is to use symbols that people relate to.



In his famous *I Have a Dream* speech, Martin Luther King Jr. uses the symbol of a bounced cheque to illustrate a point. Almost everybody there could probably understand that simple symbol, and it rang true with them. They felt defrauded by a society that claimed itself as the land of the free, just the way that you would feel if you were given a cheque that bounced. So try to use symbols that people not only relate to, but will remember.

Most people will want something else on their burger, whether it is cheese, or some kind of sauce. This is just to make the burger extra juicy. These are the little things that you can add for flavour. Is there a good way to use some humour? Are there useful props that you can use, or something that little bit special?

In the early 1990s, the band Genesis released a song called *I Can't Dance*. It was a hit all over the world, and had a really catchy video. I saw one person use the song, at the height of its popularity, at the beginning of each of a series of talks. Each week he brought more people up onto the stage, dressed like the band members, and with sunglasses on like in the video.

21 years later, I can still tell you what was said in that 6 talk series. And it was that song, and dance, in an environment that people were not expecting it, that made it so memorable. Can you think of anything tasty to add to make people remember you and your talk?

Putting all your ingredients of the burger together is your summary. Some things work well together, and others do not. Having a very sour pickle might clash with your sauce. So you need to consider the overall taste of the burger, not just the individual ingredients. Have you put it all together well, in a neat and concise summary? If you have, that will leave people with a final thought on just what you said, and what you want to leave them with.

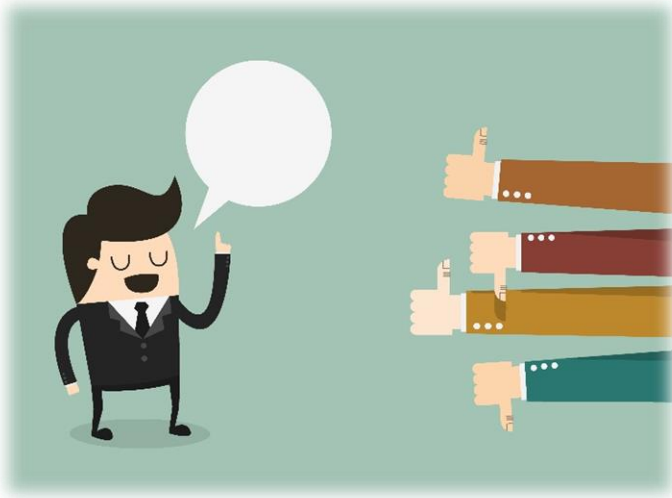
So, in summary, the best way to build and deliver a great presentation that people will both remember you and your content, is to use a frame that will keep you structured, have great content that is interesting and relevant, use symbols that people can both understand and relate to, and then try come up with some hook that is unique, and because it is dynamic will help people to remember everything.

And finally, just as a good waiter or host asks how people would like their hamburger, ask for feedback. Do a trial run with people that you know to get feedback on how it can be improved, or if you do not know how to do any of the things discussed here, contact somebody for some presentation training on how to do so.

3. How to Prepare for a Presentation

Prepare in advance

Many years ago, while running a sales team that was often going out to do presentations to clients, I used to always get new salespeople to deliver their presentations to me before going out to a client. As they were now representing the company, I needed to make sure that they were doing the most professional job that they could. Once they had done a few and I was now satisfied of their competence, we could dispense with this, but it was certainly done for at least the first 3-4 presentations that each salesperson did.



You would of course find that some new staff were already very good at presentations. They might have already been doing presentations before joining our organisation, and so had either experience, or previous training, or both. But the majority of the time, there would be people that needed some training, or perhaps just a little bit of coaching. And as people all have different strengths and weaknesses that meant that different

people would need help in different areas. But while we were simply trying to improve their performance, some people did not take the feedback well, so was there a way that I could illustrate what I needed to? Eventually I found a fantastic way, and this is how it happened.

A new person started at the company (let's call him Kevin) and did his run through with me. The actual delivery of the presentation was fantastic. The content of the presentation, in terms of what the benefits that our product would give to the client etc., was rather underwhelming.

I gave Kevin feedback, and as there was still a week to go before the big presentation, agreed to do another run through a couple of days later. When we did, the content had been changed a bit. The presentation was again fantastic, but yet again the content was a disappointment. How could I get my point across?

The boss of the company had started to do a few light weights during his lunch break, so I knew that in a closet we had some light dumbbells. I went and fetched them, and then had Kevin explain to me how he had prepared, right from the start. He started by doing two hours of work on what he wanted to say, and building the PowerPoint slides. I said that each hour represented 1kg of weight, so gave him a 2kg dumbbell to hold in his left hand. What next? He then said that he spent a total

of about 10 hours practicing his actual delivery of the presentation, across a number of small sessions. So I gave him weights that totalled 10kg to hold in his right hand.



At that point, we had done his first dress rehearsal, and I had given him feedback. He had then spent about an hour changing the content, so I gave an additional 1kg to hold in his left hand, and he had spent about another 3-4 hours practicing his new wording etc.

For this, I gave an additional 3kg to hold in his right hand. I asked if he now felt that he had things in balance. He had 3kg in his one hand, and 13kg in the other. He could immediately see how he had focused too much on one aspect, and not enough on the other.

I suggested that in future, when preparing, keep a track like this, and always ensure that you stay in balance.

And the two areas that he had to balance? Specifically identifying that preparing your content is different to preparing your delivery, and you need to spend time preparing both.

I then started to use this approach with all of my team. Some people were the opposite. They spent too much time preparing the most brilliant PowerPoint slides and focusing on content, and not enough time on delivery, planning to just ad lib as they went along with the slides. They needed to correct the balance in the opposite direction.

Find the balance

This advice I would give to anybody when preparing for a presentation. You need to get the balance correct so that not only do you have material to blow people away with, that your delivery does so too. Why build a fantastic presentation, only to let yourself down by not presenting it well? Or the opposite, being a fantastic presenter, but your content is not up to scratch.

Keeping the balance will change as you increase the time that you spend on doing presentations. If you are doing quite a bit of presenting, your skills will develop and you then need to spend more time on the weaker parts.

For example, somebody I met at a speaker's circle once taught me that they had learnt to speak at a church seminary. They had to present sermons, and part of their training included being able to prepare and deliver sermons word for word, without notes. He found that the more he did it, the better his memory became, and he did not have to spend as long memorising each word.

Actors tend to give the same feedback too. Perhaps at the start of their career, they might struggle to memorise lines, but as the years go on, it becomes far easier to do so. This gentleman told me that he now spent as much as 80% of his time developing the content and wording of his speeches, as he knew that learning the delivery of it came very quickly. But at the beginning, when you are getting started, use my example of the weights and you should develop both skills. Just as you would not want your right arm to be much more developed than your left arm after holding the extra weight, you will want to see your skills develop in both areas of presenting.

So, if you want to deliver really good presentations, balance your preparation successfully between the time spent on preparing the content, and the time spent practicing actually delivering the presentation. That way you will make an impact on both spheres.

4. How to Finish Presentations on Time

In 2002, actor Russell Crowe created a media storm by accosting the director of the BAFTA Awards ceremony after his acceptance speech on the night had been edited when televised. Many



people felt that this behaviour cost him the Academy Award for the same role, as people reacted negatively to his behaviour, and almost overnight, from being the favourite for the Oscar, saw Denzel Washington becoming the favourite to pick up the next big prize.

Do not get me wrong, I am not against Russell Crowe. I love his acting and thought that he did deserve the Academy Award. I use this as an illustration of how overstaying his welcome and the consequences of it resulted in him probably losing out.

This is a very high profile case of people taking longer than they are allocated, but many people delivering speeches or presentations make the same mistake, by overstaying their welcome and leaving a bad taste.

So why is sticking to your time limit important?

There are a number of reasons, but most are related to expectations, the expectations of your audience. In some instances, your talk might just be part of a bigger picture.

Like Crowe, there were other award winners there that night, who also had to receive awards and make short acceptance speeches. You might be talking at a conference, and the room is required for another talk in the next time slot. Or you might be doing a sales presentation, and if the company has requested all potential suppliers to come in and present, you may just be one of many that they need to get through.

In each case, there is an expectation of how long you will be, so that the show can carry on, and you going over the limit then starts to jeopardise the entire schedule finishing on time. The person who does this will usually end up annoying everybody else who now have to adapt to your overstaying your welcome.

What are the repercussions?

Depending on the situation, different things can happen. As in the case of Crowe, as the television feed was not live, part of what he said was edited out. In the case of a sales presentation, two possible things could happen. The people might let you finish, but think that if you could not perform your presentation in the time allocated, could you fulfil what you are promising in terms of business?

Or, they may be forced to cut you short, and then you do not get to finish the presentation. In that scenario, you might not yet have actually given your solution and how it will benefit them. Most embarrassingly, people that are taking too long at conventions can be walked off the stage. Would you want any of that to happen to you? I cannot imagine so.

How do you stick within your time limit?



1. Plan properly. Building your presentation is as important as delivering it. You will need to plan your presentation specifically around how long you are given. If you have a standard presentation that takes 45 minutes, and you have only been given 30 minutes, you are going to need to plan what to leave out properly, so that the content of your presentation is still relevant and interesting.

2. Practice sufficiently. Before delivering presentations, you should always be practicing them first. Are you staying within your time constraints in practice? If not, you will need to adjust the content again. Keep practicing until you

stay within your allocated time. People practice presentations in different ways. Some may want to work with their colleagues and present to them in advance. Other people practice with spouses at home. Others practice on their own and in front of a mirror. However you choose to do it, make sure that you are timing it too.

3. Make allowances for areas that could be different in terms of time. Your actual presentation might be honed down accurately, but you do need to build in some flexibility. If you are going to have a question and answer session, it is impossible to predict exactly how many questions you will get. Do you need to allow for some extra time, or explain to your audience that you will only have X number of minutes for questions, so will try to cover as many as possible in that time frame? However you choose to handle it, you do need to give thought to it ahead of time.

4. Be flexible. I have seen people presenting only for there to be a power failure. Suddenly, the PA system might not be working, or your props such as PowerPoint slides might not be showing. Would you be able to think quickly enough that you can still proceed? What decisions would you need to make? Can you carry on while the power gets restored? What do you do if you cannot?



All of these questions will have different answers depending on the situation that you find yourself in, but have you thought any options through beforehand? I have seen a sales presentation that actually went better once the power was down, as not only did it made the speaker concentrate more, but he had to focus on the crucial things, rather than rely on slides and hand-outs. But the person was prepared for things like this happening, as

they worked in a city that was experiencing rolling blackouts, where suburbs lost power if there was too much demand on the power grid.

So I think we can agree that not sticking to your time limit can produce negative repercussions. And if you do not want to see some sort of negative reaction, like Russell Crowe suffered, then learn from the tips provided here and stay within those boundaries. Make a good impression, rather than leaving a bad taste in your audience's mouth.

5. How to Develop a System for Delivering Presentations

When I was just out of university, I was lucky enough to attend public speaker training while sharing a house with many of the other people on the course. While the course produced different results for everyone, what was very interesting was to see how different people worked, and found systems that suited them individually.

The course covered all the various aspects of public speaking, but continually stressed that there is no one best way, and so you need to find a system that works for you. This will include both how you prepare and how you practice delivering the presentation.

People practised differently. Some people preferred to work on their own, while others worked together. One of my friends and I started to present to each other, and get feedback.

I must admit that Leon was a bit of a natural when it came to public speaking, and needed little help there. He could certainly give me more feedback on my bad habits than I could for him. The reverse was true when it came to content though.

I looked for really interesting content, whereas he was very factual, adding little in the way of interesting extras – almost as if his personality was making up for a deficiency in content. We really benefited from working together.

Two of the other guys chose to work independently. The one produced fantastic results, and clearly working on his own did not impede him. We used to joke with him a bit about how much time he spent in front of his mirror, but practicing in front of the mirror obviously did work for him. The second person that worked on his own did not seem to improve much as the course went on. Since this was a course where every Wednesday for a year we had training and presentations, you would have felt that in that time frame, he would have improved more than he did. The fact was that he just never found a system that worked for him.

At points he seemed to try memorising the entire speech, at other times he seemed to be using cards with key words and ad-libbing around the subjects on the card. He never seemed to stick with one system long enough to see if it would produce results.

So while I learnt many things from the course, what I learnt most from my fellow attendees was that you need to find a system that works for you.



What kind of things do I need to include in my system?

1. When thinking about the delivery of the presentation, decide how you plan to use your wording. Many people do not plan every single word. They work out their frame, their content etc., and then have key issues that they want to talk about. But if they deliver the same presentation more than once, the actual words used are not always exactly the same. This can make your presentation seem more natural, and casual. If that is the effect that you are going for, then certainly use that system. But most great orators have tended to stick to carefully prepared wording.

In the modern age, when many public people have their speeches written for them by speechwriters, the use of a teleprompter or any other similar tools ensures that they use the exact words prepared. In this case, you stay focused, and on topic. Maybe this could make your presentations have that little bit more gravitas?

2. Think about what kinds of tools and props that you will be using. Do you feel more comfortable with some than with others? As technology changes, do you need to upgrade your skills? If you have a system worked out, you might not end up using some tool that you are not 100% comfortable with.

3. When preparing your content, do you have a system of doing your research? Do you almost do too much research, and then have to cut back on content and what gets put in, or do you do a little, then work, then do a little more research? Whichever way you work, try to keep it consistent, as that will deliver the best results.

4. The best presentations have some sort of “hook” that is used. Just like fishing, you try hook your audience and keep them hanging on your every word. It might be a metaphor running through your entire speech that each point builds on the metaphor. You might come up with an acronym to help people remember the points, or use a number of words all starting with the same letter.

I attended a speech in September 1985 that I can still remember the content of because all the key points were based around words starting with M. In your system, you might try to find ways of how best to create your hook, or have a book that you keep good ideas in.

In the 1980s, Crunchie chocolates bars had television adverts that said “Crunchies go CRRR in your mouth!”, and they would put those letters across the screen. I thought that would make a brilliant hook, and kept the idea alive for 11 years before I finally found a suitable occasion to use it. I based my talk around words starting with C, and three Rs. I then handed out Crunchies in the presentation to some of the audience, as people could answer questions that I posed. People were still mentioning that speech to me years later, so I knew that it had worked. My system of keeping good ideas had not let me down.

5. Do you learn from your mistakes? If a presentation has not gone well, do you do a debrief and learn what could be improved on? Many years ago I did a presentation sitting down around a boardroom table. It never went well, and I decided to never do so again. Your system must include a way to learn how to improve.

So there are many areas of doing a presentation that you need to work on when preparing presentations. But if you learn from previous mistakes, and eradicate them and develop a system that consistently produces good results, you will find that preparing and delivering presentations becomes an ever easier task, and one that will allow you to actually enjoy delivering them.

6. How to Avoid Wandering Off the Topic



A few years ago, while visiting friends for the weekend, I accepted their invitation to go with them to church on the Sunday morning. It came time for the main sermon, and the pastor was really entertaining. He had everybody laughing and relaxed, and he was getting his point across. Surprisingly, I was actually listening attentively to him.

Slowly though, he seemed to drift off topic, and while he was still really entertaining and amusing, it became increasingly difficult to see what point he really wanted to convey.

On the way home, in the car, I asked my friends about it. Apparently he was always like that. Many years ago, before becoming a minister, he had lived a really wild life, and blamed taking too many drugs as the reason that his memory was so bad. So apparently he always wandered off topic, but because he was humorous, his congregation loved him and accepted it.

But as a visitor, I could not help but wonder what message he had wanted people to take away? Many people do this: not carefully prepared, they wander off topic, and do not stick to the point.

I have seen salespeople delivering a sales presentation go completely off-track about something unrelated to their product or how it matches the client's need. By the time they came back on track, they had lost the client's interest. If you lose their interest, you will probably lose the sale.

Now, I am not suggesting that you cannot change tack in a public speech. The greatest orators, like Martin Luther King Jr., often used to change tack midway through an address. The difference is that they were doing in intentionally. They recognised the need to change, and deliberately did so. King changed his planned speech when delivering his famous I Have a Dream speech, as he felt something better suited the occasion. But he knew what to change to. He already had other material ready that he could change to. If you change tack, and wander off topic unintentionally, usually that content is not prepared and therefore not as engaging.

So, unless you are planning to change tack, be careful that you do not wander off topic. Stick to the point. Otherwise you run the risk of leaving people wondering what you were actually trying to say. And no matter what your goal from the talk was, that was not it. Stay focused. Stay on track. Successfully convey your message.

So how do you make sure you stay on track?

Different people plan public speaking and presentations differently. There are ways to stay on track, but they often depend on how you plan.



Some people memorise entire speeches. Word for word, gesture for gesture. Obviously, if you have the time to do this, and you know that you will not want to change deliberately for any reason, it will guarantee that you stay on track.

However, some people plan the speech, but do not prepare every word. They might either use notes, cards, teleprompter, or some other system to let them know what section to move onto next. They then talk around the related topic. This certainly will keep you on track in general, but can still allow you to wander a bit within a certain section.

Many people now use a tool like PowerPoint, or something similar. They then use the slides as a guide to what to talk about next. If you have not prepared specific wording though, and maybe saved that into the text section of the slide for yourself, you can still go off topic.

There are people who prepare blocks of content. That is what King did. He had many blocks covering many different subjects, and because each block was memorised, he could move from block to block and still actually have the next few paragraphs memorised. This allowed him to change tack, often without any awareness from anybody, unless they know what he had intended to say in the first place. You could use blocks just like him, and be able to change tack if necessary. For example, if you ask for feedback in a presentation, you could have different blocks prepared allowing for different responses from your audience.

Others simply use a couple of key words as prompts, and talk ad-hoc around each subject. This is the most dangerous method. You run the risk of meandering from one topic to another, but it is still possible to have some ways to stay on track. I have seen minister's wives in the front row of a church gesticulating to them when they wander off topic. Have you got a colleague or someone with you at the presentation? Let them guide you if they know what you should be saying.

As you can see from these tips, if you do wander off topic, and want to eradicate that from your presentations, maybe you need to reconsider how you actually prepare for the presentation. Looking at different techniques to use might help you stay focused, and on message. Be flexible enough to change should you need to.

7. How to Avoid Offending People from Other Cultures

Much of the public speaking that I did in my twenties was in Africa. I was part of a team that did community building. We would travel to different places across the continent where targets had been identified, whether that was building or painting a school, or teaching people to dig wells.

Depending on the nature of the project and who was feeling fresh, different members of our team would give a talk. We would dig wells with people, but we also wanted to teach them to do it themselves, so there were detailed presentations too.

However, Africa is no different to any other continent, moving around means that you encounter many different cultures and languages, almost all of them different to your own. So every time you gave a presentation, you ran the risk of offending people.

Cultural Differences in Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication

One of my colleagues once decided to start a presentation with a joke, to break the ice. Unfortunately, he had not actually thought to ask anybody about it first, and his joke offended everybody in the audience. His talk sank like a lead balloon, and it took more than a week of working side by side with people before they started to feel like we were really trying to help.

My advice in this case: if you do intend to use humour with a foreign audience, run the joke by somebody from that culture first. Explain that it is a joke, see how they respond privately.

Better to get feedback from one person than alienate an entire audience.

Although I am balding now, at university I had grown my hair down to my belt. When I first joined this group of community builders, I had been told that there might be the odd occasion when we would be working with cultures that did not accept men having overlong hair. In that scenario, would I be prepared to cut it? I had answered that I would, and just really hoped that we would not get to a group that required this sacrifice from me. Alas, 6 months in, and I was told a trip involved a group that the previous year there had been problems with a man that had long hair, but shorter than mine.



After a very unhappy two weeks, I had my hair cut. It was a good thing too, as I ended up doing the main presentations for this group. Not only did I successfully avoid offending them, but I made friendships with people that exist to this day, over 20 years later! Now that I know them really well, I do understand what an issue my long hair would have been. I certainly would not have been able to repeatedly go back and do further work with them.

Things you should be aware of

1. Your verbal message. This can include the use of jokes, but also certain words. If you are going to be speaking in a language that is not your mother tongue, check your pronunciation. I had a Zulu colleague on one team who, when speaking English, pronounced “important” as “impotent”. After confusing his own team, let alone the audience, we eventually asked him to select a synonym so that he did not have to use that particular word.



2. Your body language. Do you use gestures that could offend? Giving somebody the thumbs up does not mean the same thing in every culture.

3. Your appearance, dress, & physical icons
As I've learnt with my hair, are there things about the way that you look that could cause offence? Do you need to cover your head? Or remove body piercings? Cover a tattoo?

While working through university, I had worked in a pub. I had received shirts with the logos of alcohol on them. At one presentation, I realised - too late - that my T-shirt had a logo that would

cause offence, and had to sweat through a 45-minute presentation with a jumper on to hide the shirt. I had to then keep saying that I was slightly ill, or they would have wondered why I insisted on keeping the extra warm layer on.

4. Your culture. Would you flaunt your success when presenting to a disadvantaged community? Be sensitive to what props you use. You might lose your audience as they spend more time wondering about the props that you have, or if you use an example that they just cannot relate to.

If you are going to use metaphors, make sure that they are understood by your audience. I once struggled trying to get people to understand an example that I was using about copying something with a fax machine. Many of the audience in the village had not ever seen a fax machine in the 1990s, let alone know what it was for.

5. Your audience. Do you need to split your audience? Do you need to separate the men and women, and present to them separately? If you do, do you need to ensure that you have a presenter that is the same gender as the audience?

If you think about these 5 elements before presenting to an audience from a foreign culture, you will certainly have gone a long way in avoiding offending them. It will get you 99% of the way there. That last 1% is about being vigilant. Always have in mind that you need to be taking care, and you will not make a mistake by taking something for granted.

So, in summary, if you are going to have to present before people from a different culture, make sure you do not offend them. See if by any research possible, or asking your contacts within the community, if there are any things that will offend, and need to be avoided. That way you will not have lost your audience even before you started.



8. How to Avoid Distractions

Many years ago, while studying cross-cultural communication, we were taught things that I have remembered to this day. I have never forgotten the statistic that 7% of communication is verbal, and that 93% is non-verbal.

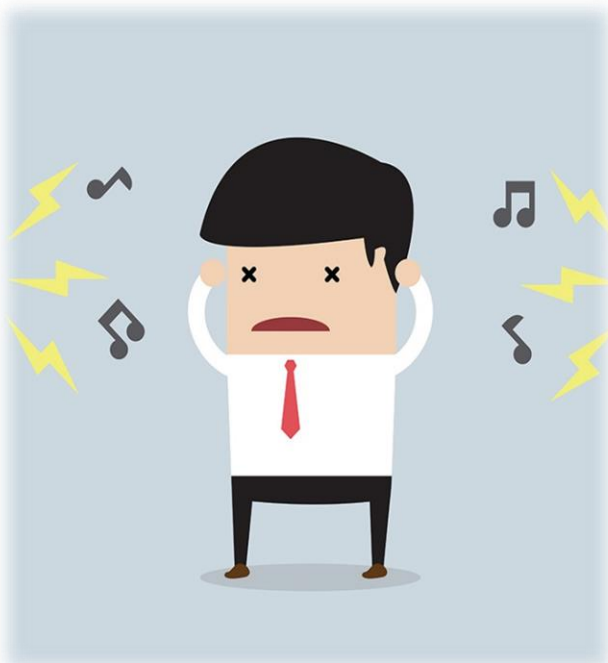
Noise factors

Similarly, I have never forgotten that included in the section on barriers to communication was something called noise factors. Noise factors were described as anything that distracts the person that you are communicating with. In some cases it hinders them understanding something you are saying, and in really extreme cases, can block all communication.

A very simple example is a man with his zip down. We all know how distracting that is, and I can assure you, if you have ever seen somebody do a presentation on a platform with his zip down, that is all that you will remember.

I remember seeing a presentation in 2005, where the speaker, after walking out from behind the podium and standing on the front edge of the stage, realised that this was the case. He immediately started to falter, and walked back behind the podium and never came out from behind there again. To this day, I can remember his name, where he spoke, and even the year 2005, but I cannot remember what he said. I was distracted by the noise factor.

Different Types of Noise Factors



1. Environmental noise factors. There are many kinds of noise factors. Some are environmental, such as real noise. Perhaps construction is happening nearby. If it is something unexpected, and truly distracting, perhaps it is better to actually reschedule the presentation, or move it, so that you can distance yourself from the noise.

Cape Town in South Africa enjoys many foreign film makers going there to film television adverts or films because of favourable exchange rates. One presentation I was in the audience for suddenly got disturbed

by the filming of an action scene with helicopters overhead. The presenter had the good common sense to check that if everybody was OK with it, to reschedule it to the following week so that everybody could benefit properly.

2. Technical noise factors. Linked to environmental noise factors are technical ones. A mobile going off while presenting, and even worse, when it is your own. But mostly this can be about the tools being used. Is there feedback through the PA system? Or have you made your PowerPoint presentation so fancy that people sit wondering how you can do what you just did?

The PowerPoint slides are a tool to use, do not allow them to be the distraction. Or even worse, your technology malfunctions. Have you rigorously tested what you plan to use? Do you know how to use it properly?

3. Social noise factors. Some noise factors could be social, such as a culture clash. Are you using words, gestures, clothing types, etc. that could distract your audience?

4. Distracting habits. Other noise factors could be things that you are doing. For a short while, I had developed the habit of standing twiddling my thumbs in front of me as I spoke, if I had no podium in front of me. Until a colleague pointed it out to me, I had not even realised how distracting it could be for an audience. I immediately worked on removing that habit.

Related to this are tics that you can develop in your speech. Do you keep going “umm” before a sentence as you try to remember your next point? When I first did a public speaking course, we had to give 10 minute presentations to the group and then get critiqued. One colleague said “you know” over 100 times in the space of a ten minute talk, and is all that people remembered.

When people pointed it out, he did not believe it and it was only when reviewing the video and counting the occasions he did it that he realised how bad it was. When focusing on your body language, remember that the 93% of non-verbal communication must not negate the 7% that you are conveying through your words.

5. Wording. And those words of yours, they also can be a noise factor. Are you choosing and using appropriate wording for your audience? Are you using wording that your audience might not understand? If you are in IT, your peers might all understand the terminology that you use, but if you are talking to others not in IT, are you using jargon that the audience does not understand?



My brother is a cardiologist. When he presents to his peers, he uses a totally different vocabulary to when he explains to me what he is currently working on. Are you using audience appropriate words, or do you leave your audience wondering, “What was that he said?” or whispering to their neighbour, “Did you get that?” This is probably the single biggest noise factor of all, but the good thing is that you are totally in control of this one. Only you can influence what you say.

Again, it comes down to planning your presentation properly. Have you thought about who your audience is and what their understanding is likely to be before you put your content together?

In summary, one of the keys to ensuring that your audience does “receive” your message properly, is to remove any possible noise factors. Are you doing everything you can to make sure that there is not an impediment to understanding? If you are and you have taken all of these things into account, you should be confident that your audience will receive and understand your message fully.

9. How to Use an Interpreter for Your Presentation

A friend of mine recently recommended a nearby police officer ask me for some friendly advice on how to speak publicly using a translator. The police officer (let's call her Lindsay) had to go in and start to work with women from another culture in the local community centre. Many of these women that she would be working with had only recently moved to the United Kingdom, and were not proficient in English. Lindsay was to deliver the talks in English, and have a local interpreter work with her on delivering the content in a language the audience could understand.

My friend had recommended Lindsay speak to me as I have extensively worked with interpreters while delivering presentations throughout Africa.

On meeting Lindsay, we clarified that she had done many of these talks before, and was happy with the way she generally spoke publicly, so it was just tips and tricks about the actual use of the interpreter. On each occasion, she would probably only meet the person minutes before having to work together. There was quite a bit that I could suggest, and should you be using an interpreter in presentations, perhaps you could benefit from these ideas too.



Firstly, make sure that the content of your talk is delivered as accurately and effectively as possible. Do not let any of your message be misunderstood, added to, or left out.

It is very easy for the people in the audience to become focused on the interpreter. The goal is to ensure that they stay focused on you, the principal speaker.

I have seen interpreters that were so much more animated and excited than the actual speaker that people were more interested in the interpreter after the talk than the speaker.

Here are some areas to focus on when working with an interpreter.

1. If possible, always try to use the same interpreter. This way, you build a relationship. You can start to trust the person, and any instructions that are given do not then have to be repeated each time. Sometimes, this is not in your hands and you just have to make do.

2. Keep each little section quite short. If you speak too long before the interpreter gets a chance, the audience can lose interest or be distracted. Short sharp bursts make your reactions back and forth sharper and more “real time” for the audience. Try to agree on some basic rules beforehand, letting them know how many sentences you intend to say in each burst.

While we call each little section a burst, keep it slow. Actually speaking too fast simply puts pressure on your interpreter and you risk them not being as accurate as you would like.

3. Are you actually planning to use a script? If so, give your interpreter a copy of it. They will be able to know where you are going with each section. Also, if it is possible, and you know how many sentences you want to say between each break, mark that in the copy you give them. They will then know exactly what you intend to say in each little burst. Most of my talks through Africa in the 1990s were handwritten. I had purchased one of those pens that has 4 colours in it, so each little section I wrote in a different colour.

4. Beware of an interpreter that takes far longer than you for each section. Are they adding things of their own? The opposite is just as important, beware of an interpreter that takes far less time than you. Are they leaving things out? Maybe there are terms that they do not understand, which they just drop. If you have time beforehand, try to cover any jargon that you might be using, and ensure that they do understand what it means.

5. Is their body language totally different to you? While this may be cultural, double check that you are not being too reserved. This can happen. You downplay your own body language, expecting the audience to be looking at the translator. You must still show your excitement and enthusiasm. Also, make sure that you are engaging with your audience, and not the interpreter. You need to be making eye contact with people in your audience, even when the interpreter is saying their part. This will help with you gaining the respect and trust of your audience.

6. Are they producing results you would not expect? You might be saying something that you think is serious, and the audience is laughing. What can have changed? A lesson we learnt while speaking in central Africa came up as we described digging a well, and uncovered a rotting carcass that stank. My colleague was stressing the hygiene risks. The translator was making it humorous about how the people digging were nauseated by the smell. We only found out afterwards when we asked the translator why the audience had been laughing.



7. Plan your timing carefully. Your talk will now take at least twice as long as it would if you were simply delivering it all yourself. Make sure that you have factored that in when building the presentation.

Make your interpreter understand that they are never to answer questions, no matter how simple the answer. They must pass it on to you to answer. You have to be seen as the person with the knowledge and answers, it is *you* giving the talk.

8. Try to avoid humour. Most interpreters tend to agree that jokes do not translate well. If you really want to try, test it on the interpreter first and see what their response is. This can prevent your humour from falling flat.

9. Have a clear CTA. If you do have a call to action at the end, prescribe clearly what is to happen, and if anything is to be handed in, get them to hand it to you personally. In Lindsay's case, she had to ask the ladies who would be coming to a series of follow-up meetings after each initial talk. People were to fill in a card and hand it in. She asked the people to still pass it to her at the end, not the interpreter, so at least she could make a personal farewell to each person.

Subsequent to this advice being given, Lindsay has let me know that she has delivered the first round of talks at the various community centres. The response has been very good, and many ladies have committed to attending the following meetings. Lindsay has also managed to secure the use of the same interpreters. Due to geographic location and a couple of different languages being used, she cannot use one interpreter for all the centres, but she can use the same interpreter at each location, so each group of ladies will only ever meet her and the same interpreter. This should make working together a lot easier each time. The tips had really helped, and she wants to now improve the way that they interact together before the audience.

By following these tips, like Lindsay, you should be able to ensure that you are still the focus of the talk, and that the content and message of your presentation will be communicated accurately, and in the correct frame of mind. It will also help prevent the pitfalls of working with a different culture group, and not let any miss-steps mean that you do not make your point effectively. It should hopefully make you the success that you are just as you deliver presentations to audiences who speak your own language.

10. How to Handle Questions Well

Ten years ago, while working for a company that provided training on how to build an IT career (such as becoming a programmer), the company arranged a series of presentations that I was to give at secondary schools. Depending on what the school felt was most beneficial, some of the talks were aimed at those with a few years of schooling to go, and what types of subject choices they should be making. Others were aimed at the students who were about to leave school and wanted to know what their options were. Yet others were to try and help young ladies realise that IT was not just for the boys.



I had done quite a bit of public speaking in my life, and that was why the company had chosen me to deliver these talks. The first couple went ahead as planned, but on about the third or fourth talk, one of the students butted in and started asking questions. What I only realised afterwards is that in all the public speaking that I had ever done, I had not really been in an environment when questions would get asked. With

the schools, we had arranged that questions would then get asked at the end of the entire talk. So what was this young upstart doing?

It threw me, and I probably did not handle it too well, because instead of dealing with it properly, I answered it, and that just opened the floodgates and everybody was calling out. I knew that I had to plan to handle this better.

Afterwards, when having the opportunity to think about it and discuss it with others, it was obvious. The problem was that I had lost control. And that is the simple answer to dealing with questions – stay in control.

How to stay in control

You can stay in control in a number of ways. You might want to suggest to anybody that interrupts with a question that you will probably cover what people plan to ask about in the talk, so if they can wait, and if it is still not answered by the end, then you will gladly field questions. Or possibly at the end of a section, if not all the way at the end.

A second way to deal with a question is to answer it, but preface your answer by saying that you will answer this one question, but others will get dealt with at the end.

However you have dealt with things so far, you then get to the end of your talk, or the end of the section, and it is time to open the floor to questions. If you have not done this before, it can also be a daunting thing. How do you keep control? Do you treat everybody the same? You cannot really. Talking to school children would be different to talking to professional business people. If you are doing a sales presentation, you might not want to suggest to only 3 people in front of you to put their hands up first. They might not react well to that, and you then run the risk of losing the deal if people feel that you have not treated them like adults.

So what does this mean? It means that just as you have prepared what you want to say, and how you want to say it, you also have to prepare to answer questions. Think about who your audience is, and how best to invite questions. Could you break the questions down? For example, going to the schools I would then ask if anybody had questions about programming, then web designing etc., and move through things systematically. Once you have worked that out, then come up with the phrasing on how to invite questions. Come up with a system that suits you.

When doing the school presentations, if it was in a hall in front of many students, I used to work from left to right, and front to back. It seemed the most systematic to me, and helped me control the situation. To people towards the back right, they could slowly see the way that it was going, and then did not have to keep their hands up, they usually started lowering them until I started to get near to them again.

It took me a couple of presentations to fully develop ways to stay in control, but once I had, I never had problems with any of the school children again.



When doing sales presentations later in my work career, it was usually to a much smaller group, if I then did open up to questions, I did so but usually looked in the direction of the most senior person, giving them my full attention. That also then helped any of their subordinates to see that I was deferring to him or her, and they often did likewise, allowing that person to ask first. If the senior person did not have questions, the subordinates then often would ask if they had any.

A crucial reason that you want to stay in control is that you might have some sort of commitment that you want to gain from your audience. At the schools presentations, we often wanted to get people to come forward after the talk to leave details if they wanted any follow-up or course material to be sent to them.

While working on cruise ships, I used to do a presentation on great snorkelling spots on each island in the Caribbean. We then asked for people to sign up straight away and rent the equipment. If you had lost control, and people had started to leave, you had just lost your potential to generate revenue. Staying in control of your Q & A session means that you retain everybody's attention, right till your final conclusion. Why lose your audience right at the end?

So if you want to avoid coming unstuck and losing control when opening up to questions at a presentation, come up with a plan. That is the best way to stay in control, and that is how best to handle a question and answer session.

11. Conclusions

Presenting information clearly and effectively is a key skill to get your message across and, today, presentation skills are required in almost every field. Improving your presentation skills takes time and a lot of practice, but if you start implementing the tips I've mentioned in the previous ten chapters, you'll be wowing audiences in no time.