

Ten Commandments for Presentations¹

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Summary

It always amazes me, unfortunately often in a negative way, how only a few people know how to make and deliver a good presentation. For many scientists it's usually their Achilles' heel. Many get so caught up in their work that when they present it at a scientific meeting or to the general public, their presentation often looks confusing, boring or sometimes even scary. The good news is that there are some general rules that can work magic with presentations.

1. Know your audience



This rule may seem so simple, but it is *the* most crucial point and can make a world of difference. Even before you commit to giving a presentation to a group of people you need to know their demographics. Is your audience young? Are they old? Well-educated? Sometimes you may also want to know their nationality, race or religious background. Of course, you don't need to know all this every time; decide based on your subject matter. For instance, when I give a public scientific lecture in a high school I try to be more hip, use slang, refer to things that the students are interested in. On the other hand when I give the same public lecture in a local city-funded cultural centre attended by mostly senior, well-educated people, I use more subtle language and don't try so hard to make it fun. So, adjust your presentation according to the audience.

Personalising presentations is also a good idea. For instance, when I give a lecture about galaxies and show what the Milky Way looks like, I always show the location of the Earth by writing the appropriate name of the city, or the institution where I'm giving the lecture. You'd be amazed at how a simple thing like that makes a difference.

2. Be yourself



However much you change your presentation to accommodate the audience, whatever you do, still be yourself. That's what makes people trust you. The last thing you want when you give a presentation is for the audience to not believe what you are telling them. When does the audience distrust you? When they smell bad acting. Trying too hard to be something you are not leads to bad acting and to failure. Little

things that will help include: being comfortable in what you are saying and wearing, and believing in the content.

3. Be the audience

Make a presentation that you, if you were the audience, would find interesting, engaging, smooth, fun, and whatever else you are trying to achieve. Avoid anything that would put even you to sleep! Remember, if you are not having fun writing it, making it, practising and delivering it, then your presentation probably needs a bit of rewriting.

4. Practice makes perfect



Practise, practise, practise. An absolute "don't" is saying your presentation out loud for the first time in front of the audience. Every time I finish writing a presentation I am happy with how it looks on paper/PowerPoint, but when I go over it out loud

I always run into a few bumps and end up rewriting it to make it smoother and clearer. However, don't overdo it. There is such a thing as too much practice, which results in identical sentences coming out of your mouth each time you run through the presentation. You don't want to learn it by heart because then it starts sounding fake, like bad acting.

However it is a good idea to memorise a few introductory sentences at the beginning of the presentation, especially if you are nervous – knowing a few lines will help you feel more comfortable and ease you into the rest of your presentation.

5. Setup — confrontation — resolution

Right through your presentation you want your audience to know where they are, why they are there and where they are going. This is what a smooth presentation is. Just like a nicely written book, it has a setup, a confrontation or a plot, and a resolution. First tell your audience why they are there. Give them a reason why the topic is important. Then you need to lay out a plan of action and tell them what the goal is and how you plan to get there. Next you need to set some general rules, telling them any important things they need to know in order to understand your presentation, and only then do you lead your audience through the plot, through your method, your procedure, through the vital and most difficult part of your presentation.

After that, the plot needs to reach a resolution, a conclusion, results and the punchline of your presentation. Make sure that when delivering this you make a big deal out of it because after all, that's why both you and the audience are there. Finally, you want your presentation to end smoothly, and not with a season-ending cliffhanger like a TV show — that annoys the audience.

6. Keywords

● keywords

Be sure to know what the keywords of your presentation are. In every presentation many words are spoken, many PowerPoint slides are shown, many demonstrations are done, and that is just too much information. If you give a good presentation, most of the audience will be able to recount it a day after. A week after and most of them will only remember bits and pieces but will recall what the point of it was. A year after,

well... if they can reproduce a three-word summary of your presentation, then you were successful! Those three words are your keywords: something that people will take home with them and sticks in their mind. So break your presentation up into keywords. The easiest way to do that is to summarise your presentation into three or so words. Once you know your keywords, make sure that you repeat them as often as you can (without sounding too strange!) during your presentation, because repetition makes people remember.

7. Not too much

There is no such thing as too much information. Especially when you are presenting your own work, you will want to tell the audience everything and fill them in with all the details, but they don't need all this. They only need to understand the presentation and get the punchline. Anything that is not essential for your talk, but that you want to tell your audience, have as a backup (slides), in case someone asks about it. So try not to clutter your talk with information that people can live without.

If you are giving a PowerPoint presentation or similar, don't have too many slides. A good guide is one slide per minute. Don't have too much text on your slides, because that will make it difficult for your audience to read and listen to you at the same time. If you are a scientist, please try not to use too many equations; show only those that are absolutely essential.

8. What is the centre, not how



Sometimes, with all the nice things that software such as PowerPoint can do, it can be that *what* gets hijacked by *how* during your presentation. If you use too many animations, fancy slide transitions, titles and words, this can drive your audience away from what you are saying to how you are presenting it. For instance, using a nice, but dark, image in the background of the text on your slides is a bad idea since the text is then harder to read, and you never want the design of your presentation to get in the way of the topic. Don't overdo it when trying to make your presentation look fancy and shiny. After all, what you are saying is the centre of your presentation, and not the presentation design itself.



9. Eye contact

This is very simple, but makes a world of difference. Establishing regular eye contact with your audience makes you look friendlier, believable and trustworthy, which is essential for a successful presentation. Unless you give them the "Here's Johnny" Jack Nicholson look, of course.

10. Stick to the time

Finally, nothing annoys people more than a presenter who goes over the time limit. You can deliver a brilliant presentation, but if it drags on for too long, eventually some people will be annoyed, and you don't want that to be their last impression.

Conclusion

There you have it: my ten commandments for presentations. They probably look intuitive and obvious, but sticking to them is a different story. Hopefully they will be useful; trust me when I say that they will make a world of difference.

Notes

¹ This article first appeared on the Cosmic Diary (www.cosmicdiary.org), a Cornerstone project of the International Year of Astronomy 2009.

Biography

Tijana Prodanovic is a Serbian astrophysicist. Her interest in astronomy began at the tender age of ten. Since then she has pursued science as a career, obtaining a PhD in astrophysics. Finding new ways of communicating science to the public ranks highly in her list of interests.