

Be The Star

I think the single most important factor in your presentation is YOU. But we have all been pummeled with messages about “content is king” and “humility” and “completeness and correctness.” It’s enough to make a presenter stand in the dark and read colorful slides from a projection screen. And, sadly, sometimes it does.

One fact is that in school assignments you are required to create good content, and the quality of that content is usually a major part of your grade. You also may have to share the presentation time with other team members.

Another fact is that EVERY time you give a presentation, in school or out, you are selling yourself. You also are probably selling an idea as well. For real success you need to create a synergy between these two “sellings.” To subordinate yourself, present content, and let the idea sell itself...is a cop out and a bad strategy. You may as well just mail out a copy of the material.

The Slides are not The Content

Identifying your carefully designed and prepared “slides” (e.g. PowerPoint presentation) as The Content is a dangerous, yet common slip. The Content is really the ensemble of ideas that you want the listener to internalize. Slides are supposed to support that mission, just as your oral delivery does. This is quite different from “being the object of delivery.” If the slides have really captured everything you want to say, then we have a conundrum:

Why does anyone need you to read the slides to them?

The root of this problem is a lack of clarity in the purpose of “slides.” Many presenters want the slides to be: notes to themselves, object of attention during the presentation, AND a complete documentation of The Content (usually delivered in a binder to the audience members prior to the presentation.) Such triple duty is absurd. IF in fact you have completely documented The Content in slides, or some other form, then I suggest you deliver that to the audience (in the proverbial binder)—BUT do not use it or direct them to refer to it during your presentation. Just let them know that it is there, in its completeness, for them to refer to AFTER your presentation. Preparing such a document is a lot of work, but it relieves you of worrying about covering every detail during the presentation itself. But is also unbearably tempting to call your preparation “done” and use those slides for the presentation.

You need to prepare another set of slides, the select gems that will harmonize with what you are going to say (not BE what you are going to say!). The rules for these are

completely different. They present an overall guide to the concepts; they give you cues on where to elaborate orally; they give the audience a visual channel to help anchor what they are hearing. Of course, they can also present important and complex information in interesting ways that words can't do alone.

Endure the Pain of the Pause

If you've ever been truly impressed by a really powerful speaker (anyone from Billy Graham to.....) you will have noticed that they carefully choose moments to pause—to be totally silent for up to 4 or 5 seconds or more. In political speeches this is often used as a space (and a prompt) for applause. But in other situations it's a really important 'device':

- It lets the message sink-in to the listener's brain
- It separates and emphasizes an important message
- It provides a natural break for a shift to another concept
- It lets the speaker rest
- It lets the listener rest

If this sounds all too obvious, note the next time you hear a speaker who is afraid to stop for even one-half second. All the breathing room will be filled with ersatz (and tiresome) repetitions of "like," "uhhh," "you know," and similar styrofoam peanuts.

One explanation for this syndrome is that it is actually painful, cognitively, for the speaker to pause. It is really a matter of practice. You can and should learn to do it. A key help in your practice is to have a friend with a watch time your pauses and report to you how long they are. You will be surprised to find that there is a 'time dilation' in the speaker's mind. A very short pause, of perhaps just 2 seconds, will seem excruciatingly long to you while you are speaking. Practice, and learn to use pauses up to 6 or 7 seconds, so you know how it feels, and are totally comfortable with it.

Connecting with the Audience

Think of the audience as a person...and you're dead. Audience is a collective noun, an abstraction that defies a handshake. No matter how many persons are in the audience, you must think of them as individuals and engage some of them as individuals. Fortunately there is a simple and (if practiced) easy technique to do this.

You need to make direct eye-to-eye contact with one individual while you are speaking, and maintain that contact until you have completed a thought. And you need to do this with many different individuals in the audience.

Here are some details:

- Don't look at the back wall, the clock, or someone's forehead. Look in one person's eyes, even if they're 20 rows back and yawning. (I once had a person break eye contact with me and I just maintained my focus until I finished the thought.)

- It's actually easier for your brain to process your thoughts when your visual field is not changing. Scanning with your eyes actually is a mental distraction while talking.
- If you break eye contact before finishing a thought (not necessarily a sentence) the whole experience is spoiled. You look like an automaton that really didn't want to connect.
- Even those in the audience that you do not make eye contact with will notice that you DO talk to individuals, and that conveys immense personal charisma.
- If you need to refer to note cards, for example, then don't start talking until you are looking at someone.

I was once in a training exercise on this technique where each person in the group had to get up in front and be the speaker. All the others raised their hands and each would only lower his/her hand after the speaker had made and held eye contact for at least 10 seconds. The goal was to make all the hands go down. Although awkward at first, with practice the technique became smooth and natural.

This is a method that you really have to believe in to do well. If you think of it as a stunt it'll never work.

Handling Slides

It's common if not darn near imperative to have projected slides in prepared presentations. And doing so can be incredibly troublesome.

You've probably heard or read a lot of advice about how much detail to put on a slide, how big the fonts have to be, and what constitute "bad" color combinations. I offer a simple principle:

Don't let the slides compete with you for attention.

Remember this: whenever you display a slide, everyone in the audience will start reading everything on it. Don't kid yourself that you will "lead them through each part." One way to do that is to use "builds" that progressively reveal more and more of the slide as you click. Another is using a mask (like a piece of paper) to cover up parts. Talk about ruining audience rapport! Obvious "control mechanisms" are simply not gracious.

The only way for you to cope with the attention competition is to "clear the slide." This does not mean remove it...but to simply read it (because that's what they are doing! And anything else you say will be in cognitive competition). Do not rephrase or add comment (until after you've cleared it). You may, and probably should, skip minor areas or details. Think of it as introducing the concepts, with the visual supporting the audio. Once that is done you have the attention again, without competition. As you've probably guessed, this means you can't have too much detail on the slide. A picture or graphic is great, and gets ideas beyond the "word" channel. Note: it's really best if you don't talk towards the screen! Gesture to the screen and look at it to get your cues, and turn back to the

audience before you start talking. Repeat as necessary until you cleared all the major items on the slide.

A very common mistake in using slides is not clearing the screen when a topic is complete. Typically a speaker will leave the last slide displayed until the next one is needed. This is lazy and is yet another case of cognitive distraction for the audience. I wholeheartedly recommend that you use “blank” slides frequently. They simply have the same solid background color (e.g. dark blue) as the rest of the slides. [Note: bright colors or white simply won’t do!] This technique avoids the visually jolting results from turning a projector off and on repeatedly during a presentation. Ideally you should have enough room light that you are easily seen during the entire presentation and that the slides are readable as well. The “blank slide” removes the distraction of the screen.

A final comment about slides: you truly may have a couple of featured slides, perhaps a graph or chart, that is very rich in content. And you may spend several minutes in detailed exposition and perhaps even discussion. That’s fine. It’s also quite different from slides that simply outline or pace a narrative exposition.

Handling Time Pressure

Inevitable, at some time in your life, you will encounter a situation in which you are forced at the last moment to squeeze a presentation into less time than planned. The possible excuses are innumerable. Particularly annoying ones are “we got a late start” and “running over by previous speakers.” I believe these crisis moments are really opportunities to shine by showing how graceful you can be under pressure. If you don’t buy that idea, then I don’t see much hope for rescuing the situation.

So, let’s assume that you do want to make the most of the bad situation. There are some things that you simply must do:

Don’t Waste Time

The worst examples here are making ANY kind of statement’s like “we running late”, “I wish I had more time,” “I can’t go into this now,” “refer to you notes for this,” “I’ll come back to this later,” “how much time do I have now?”. Not only are these all wasteful, they constantly distract the listeners and remind them to be unhappy. What a bad idea.

Don’t Rush

This is a really naive attempt at a solution. It increases tension and anxiety in the listeners, and shown how inflexible and unimaginative you are. Never flash up a slide that doesn’t get time to be really absorbed. Just skip all but the most very critical and interesting slides. (And don’t say that you’re skipping slides. Don’t try to keep the audience synched with their notebooks and your slide—give it up!)

Act Graceful

What you really want is to BE graceful, and acting graceful is a great start (you may surprise yourself!). A smile is a great start. You may deserve to be angry as hell, gypped out of your promised time—but it's not going to spoil the moment for you or your audience. Keep some pauses in your presentation—to reinforce that you are not succumbing to rushing. And a great element is to include some short humorous comment or reflection. That will show better than most anything else that you are at ease. Don't tell a funny story or get off-track from the subject...just season it a bit. You should have items like this planned and rehearsed for your full presentation. Just be sure to retain one for the time crunch scenario.

Present Less Content

This is the in-your-face reality that you must deal with, and it requires that you know your content cold and have thought about shortened versions beforehand. I actually recommend that for every presentation you give you design and rehearse a 3 minute version of it. No one will ask you to present a shorter version, and it will absolutely force you to choose the most critical concepts and articulate them efficiently. Next “expand” it to perhaps 10 minutes by adding back content from the full presentation. Get these two shorter versions riveted in your mind. With practice you will be able to custom tailor what you present to any time limit, on the fly, in real time. What you really need is a strong self discipline NOT to start a sentence you really don't to have to complete. It's the complete opposite of extemporaneous filling and “BS-ing”.

On one occasion, because a previous speaker ran over time unconscionably, I was squeezed to about half of my allotted time. Without blinking or excusing I skipped about the first 25% of the material, substituting one clear sentence. For the remaining material I continually omitted detail except for a couple of highlights. Finally I omitted the recap and summary and used a two sentence wrap-up. It could not have gone better. Everyone in the audience realized what had happened, and senior managers complimented me afterwards.

Understanding your content as a structural tree with limbs of detail and further decorations (examples, charts, stories, jokes) will help you understand the material better yourself—perhaps spot some imbalance or empty areas in the design. And it supports the crisis demands for abbreviating.

One last reminder: don't simply shave off everything but the trunk and 3 big limbs. You need to selectively keep a few detail and decorative elements so that the aesthetics are preserved and it is memorable.