FJWilson Ltd guide to presentations

By Anthony Haynes

I) The basic decision

So you have to give a presentation – for example, as part of a job interview. Now ask yourself this question: 'Do you want to give the best possible presentation?'

This might seem an absurd question: surely anyone giving a presentation would want to do it as well as possible!

Well, no, actually. In the majority of presentations that I observe it's evident that the aim of the presenter is not to optimise the presentation, but rather to do it pretty much the same way as everyone else does.

There is a kind of logic to this stance. If you follow the herd, you're unlikely to be singled out for criticism.

But there's a flaw here. If the standard of presentations was typically high, there would be no problem. But, honestly, *are* the presentations that you observe typically great?

The fundamental decision, therefore, when preparing to give a presentation is to either

(a) aim to follow the herd;

or **(b) optimise your presentation.**

It's one or the other: it's not possible to do both at the same time.

I have worked with a few people who, after reflection, have chosen option (a). If that's your decision too, I can't do much to help you – so don't read the subsequent tips. If, on the other hand, you're an optimiser, I hope you'll find the tips constructive, incisive, and refreshing.

II) Learning from observation

As well as giving workshops on presentation skills, from time to time I attend other people's workshops to see what I can learn from them. A few years ago I attended an

excellent workshop run by Janet Morris for the [Independent Theatre Council](). The first thing Janet did was ask participants to reflect on presentations they'd seen.

We had no difficulty drawing up a list of examples of bad practice. We were then challenged to avoid the bad practice in our own presentations.

So let me now invite you to do the same: reflect on presentations you've experienced and draw up your own list.

By way of making a start, I'll just say a word about a day I attended at the University of Cambridge's Department of Engineering.

During the day, I saw fifteen presentations. At the end of the day, the professor awarded a prize for the best one. During their presentations, fourteen of the presenters spent some of the time looking backwards at their slides, rather than forwards at the audience. One didn't. And fourteen of them (the same fourteen) spoke too fast for the audience (well, for this member of the audience at least) to take in the information. One didn't — the same one who didn't look backwards. Who do you think won the prize?

Yes, you guessed it! :)

III) Communication, stupid

In my previous post, I recommended reflecting on presentations you've observed in order to generate a list of things not to do in your own presentation.

But I need now to introduce a distinction between (a) preparation and (b) implementation.

The list I mention above is very useful when you are preparing a presentation. If, for example, you've written on your list 'Avoid looking backwards at my slides' then you should certainly think about that whilst preparing your presentation. You might, for example, decide to use fewer slides or build in more interactive episodes that force you to look at the audience — asking them questions, for example.

But when, however, it comes to implementation — to actually giving the presentation — it is no longer useful to think about such things. In fact, doing so is likely to be counter-productive.

Here's why. First, there a psychological problem. If you keep telling yourself not to do X, you will in effect keep putting the idea of X into your mind — with the result that you may

become *more* likely to do X. (I learnt this playing cricket: if I kept telling myself not to play a shot, I ended up playing it!)

Second, there is a problem of focus. Resources on how to give a presentation frequently give people a whole list of instructions: 'Don't stand with your hands in your pockets!'; 'Don't wave your arms around'; and so on.

Such lists are well-intentioned and each item on the list may be sensible, But if when you are giving a presentation your attention is focused on a list of dos and don'ts in your head, it will not – cannot – be focused on the thing, the only thing, that matters, namely communicating with the audience.

If you focus your attention entirely on ensuring that you're communicating, you will be doing the things that matter – and, as a bonus, you'll find that all those other things (not putting your hands in your pockets, for example) have a habit of going away.

By 'going away', I mean either that you don't do them or that you do, but nobody worries about them – because the audience too is focused on the communication.

So, for the actual presentation, my recommended list of dos and don'ts has no don'ts and only one do, namely:

<div align="center">

communicate!

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IV) Introductions

Naturally, in a presentation the introduction is critical for determining whether the speaker is likely to retain the audience's interest. So consider what I suggest is the method used by most speakers, which is to begin by saying, 'OK, let me tell you a little bit about myself/us' (where 'us' = the business or the organisation that the speaker represents).

Does each member of the audience think, 'Oh, good! I like to listen to self-indulgence/corporate blah'? No, each of them begins to think about what they need to pick up at the shop on the way back from work – or turns their attention to their smart phones to see what messages they have. Their attention has been dissipated at a stroke.

What should you do instead?

First, begin with a formal phrase. For example, 'Good morning, everyone'. Last year I attended the Cambridge Festival of Classics. I listened to several speakers. All bar one dispensed with formality by beginning with a phrase such as 'OK' or 'Right'. Only one gave the audience the courtesy of a formal opening. The advantage of such courtesy is that it

indicates respect for the audience – who are then more likely to respond with respect for the speaker.

Second, begin to tell a story. A 'Once upon a time' strategy is the one that an audience is least likely to resist. Once the story is under way, *then* you can work in information about yourself or your organisation as a functional component of the story.

For example, if you want to communicate that you have expertise in, say, dealing with public sector organisations, show *as part of the story* how that expertise enabled you to think or do something that someone without that expertise could not.

V) Telling a story

So how do you go about getting straight into telling a story?

My favourite technique is one I learnt from a lecturer in creative writing. She in turn had taken the idea from a book – I believe it was *The Weekend Novelist*.

It goes like this. Start with a problem. Then explain the attempted solution. Then explain the problem this in turn throws up. Then explain the attempted solution to that problem. Then explain the next problem... and so on.

For example, let's invent a character called Jane. Jane has a problem: she's short of money. What does she (or anyone else) do to try to solve the problem? She decides to take a second job, working at weekends. What problem then arises? It puts strain on the relationship with her partner. What does she (or anyone else) do to try to solve the problem? ...and so on.

This structure can readily be applied to professional, commercial, and occupational contexts. For example, a membership organisation has a problem: its national profile is low. What does it do to try to solve this problem? It decides to develop a social media campaign. What problem then arises? The organisation lacks expertise in the use of social media for the purpose of branding. What does it do to try to solve the problem? ...and so on.

I've used this structure, and helped others to use it, countless times. Its advantages are that, typically:

- it proves easy to construct the story;
- it is easy to communicate the story to other people (listeners 'get it');

- the stories are easy to remember (so the speaker doesn't need notes and listeners may relate it to other people, leading to word-of-mouth publicity).

VI) Another way to tell a story

An alternative is to construct a story around pairs of characters. These characters may be individual people. Or they may be organisations, or ideas, or forces, or trends – or whatever.

To give an example: Lord Eatwell once presented a BBC television series on the 'de-industrialisation' of Britain. To explain his argument, he needed to give an account of the history of economic thought. How to do so to an audience that might know little, and care less, about the subject?

He chose two tendencies. In the one corner, he had economists who, generally, believed that markets worked well. In the other, he had those who believed they didn't. This enabled him to introduce one argument, then explain why people dissented, then how people countered the arguments of the dissenters, and so on.

Whichever characters you choose, the key point is to focus the plot on the *changing* relationship between the two. For example, at times they might be antagonists; at other times they might work in tandem; or they might overlap in some way; or motivate each other, or...: there's no shortage of possibilities.

For example, suppose that you work for a membership organisation. You want to raise its profile. You might choose as the two characters in your story (1) traditional media and (2) social media. At the start of the story, they might be opponents: you have staff time to devote only one of them. But then you might find that your traditional media campaign leads to activity on social media; or you might send a traditional press release about an upcoming social media initiative; or you might separate the two kinds of media, using traditional media for one kind of purpose and social for another. And so on.

Such stories always involve simplification. But the advantage of this is that the plot may be easily followed. And the plots can be exciting, especially if you follow the arc of stories that we know people engage with – from comedy, say, or tragedy or romance.

There's just one point to remember. To keep the story focused, you need in addition to the two characters a third component, namely the focus around which the story revolves. In Eatwell's story, it was the growth of manufacturing; in my example above, it was the raising of an organisation's profile.

So:

1. select two characters;
2. select a focus;
3. show how the relationships change over time.

Leave everything else out.

VII) The question of slides

Next week I'm giving a presentation, at a conference. This week, I received an email from the administrator. It began: 'You will be receiving an invitation to access a Dropbox folder shortly. This is for you to upload your PowerPoint presentation to in advance of the conference. Please also to bring a copy on a USB stick as a back-up'.

Note the assumption that because I'm giving a presentation, I must be using slides (and, incidentally, there is a further assumption that these will be in the form of PowerPoint).

I'm now receiving reminder emails, presumably because I haven't yet uploaded my slides. I haven't uploaded them because there aren't any, nor will there be.

The reason that I'm not using slides is that I am not saying anything that requires visual presentation. I don't need graphs or maps or video clips, etc. I'm using words. I don't need slides for words, because I can use a different form of technology: my voice.

I could, of course, put some of those words onto slides. But then I will present the audience with a decision: do they look at me or at the screen?

I want them to look at me because then, and only then, can I establish eye contact. By making eye contact, I can gain feedback in the form of visual cues from their eyes and faces. I can tell, are they interested in this bit? are they disagreeing with me? are they enjoying this? and so on. And I can then adjust my presentation to suit the evolving situation.

Even those members of the audience with whom I don't make eye contact will be able to sense that I am making contact with *some* people – and somehow that is often sufficient to make all the others feel involved too. They sense that there's communication going on here.

If I use slides, I will have to move to the side. I will literally and metaphorically marginalise myself. It won't be my presentation any more, it will be Microsoft's. If you're

making a presentation for, say, marketing or sales purposes or to get a job, making yourself forgettable in this way isn't recommended.

In small groups – a presentation to three interviewers, for example – the decision about when to look at slides and when to look at the presenter is frequently a cause of awkwardness, even embarrassment.

But doesn't everyone use slides? In everyday language, 'slides' has become a synonym for 'presentation'. (Presumably, the administrator I quoted above heard the word 'presentation' and thought, in Pavlovian fashion, 'slides'). That isn't, however, a sufficient rationale: at the start of this resource, I presented the fundamental decision for presenters – to do things the way most other people do or to do it better.

When a presenter loads up some slides (usually consisting of what seems like a million bullet points) I don't hear people say, 'Oh, good, we're going to see yet more slides!'

I'm not recommending the opposite extreme, i.e. never using slides. My point is simply that slides should be used optimally, as the result of a decision rather than by default. If you want to display a graph, you do indeed need a slide, for that part of the presentation.

The key questions, then, are: do I need slides? If so, for which parts of my presentation?

VIII) Visual impairment

If you decide to use slides, or some other visual aid, the question arises, how will you make your presentation accessible to people who are visually impaired?

Some people may not be able to see your visual aids at all; others may not be able to see them easily or distinctly. Yet you presumably want to reach everyone in your audience.

And, in any case, there are such things as disability rights.

So, one needs to anticipate.

Take two examples.

1. Someone in your audience has forgotten their glasses. This may sound trivial. And, of course, it's their fault, not yours. But you're still presented with the problem, how to communicate with them. Note that the less cluttered the slide, the larger the font used for any text, the more you use sans-serif font, and the less you rely

on slides, the easier your presentation will be to access. A welcome by-product here is that, by taking steps to anticipate problems arising from visual impairment, you actually make your presentation better for everyone.

2. Colour blindness is quite a common, and commonly overlooked, condition. I frequently encounter visual aids that ignore this point. There are resources that enable you to assess your slides, handouts, etc. from this point of view – for example, [Vischeck](#).

If you're the presenter that successfully accommodates the needs of people with visual impairment, you will emerge as more professional than others. As a result, you'll gain a competitive advantage.

You'll also have done the decent thing!

IX) Superiority of lower case

Using upper case probably helps to make a bold initial impression.

But it isn't actually very readable.

Why? Because, when we read, we don't normally read every letter (one reason typographic errors can be difficult to spot). Typically, we decode words by looking at their overall visual morphology. Two of the main cues for this are (in non-technical language) tails and heads. By tails, I mean those parts of letters that go below the mid-line, for example, lower case g, p, and y have tails.

Heads are the upper bits of tall letters, for example, h, t, and l.

You can see the problem with upper case: the letters are all the same height. Thus upper case makes our apprehension of words less direct.

It's very common to see that, in wanting to give headings (or some other piece of text) emphasis, presenters resort to UPPER CASE.

This is understandable, but self-defeating.

X) Avoidance of cramming

If (I stress 'if') you use slides, there will obviously be a limit to how much text you can put on one slide.

I've read a number of texts about presentations. From my reading, the standard view that emerges is that the maximum limit is 8 lines, or, if you're presenting a table rather than straight text, 5 rows.

When I started running workshops on presentations, I thought that simply imparting this knowledge would improve people's presentations.

I was mistaken, for two reasons:

1. When people hear 'maximum of 8 lines' they often translate that in their minds to 'write eight lines of text'. In effect, they treat 'maximum' as a synonym for 'minimum'. I don't understand the psychology behind this, but I do know that it happens. So I need to say, loud and clear: **fewer than 8 lines would be preferable!**
2. Many presenters somehow don't believe that the standard recommendation applies to them. I guess their reasoning, which is probably subconscious, runs something like this: 'I have so much of interest to say that I am entitled to a dispensation'. They ignore the fact that the optics don't change. People don't remove their eye balls and replace them, for the duration of the presentation, with those of eagles.

There are, therefore, no dispensations.

XI) Background

If you are using slides or some other visual aid, such as a poster, there is a decision to be made, namely what colour should the background be?

The most common choice, especially for slides, is white.

I say 'choice', but I suspect this often isn't a genuine choice: rather, presenters simply conform to the default option.

The problem is, white isn't usually optimal. White tends to be garish. Experiment with a different background. For example, a very pale yellow or grey. I say 'very pale' because the aim here isn't to draw attention to the use of colour. The aim is simply to provide a

more comfortable reading experience. A pale tone that your audience barely notices, and that sets off the text nicely, is optimal.

XII) Against headings

You're preparing your presentation. You've decided, on this occasion, to use slides. You think about what your slides are going to be about. Supposing, for example, you're presenting on some project you've just completed. Maybe you want to discuss the outcomes of the project. So you create a new slide and write the heading 'Outcomes'. Maybe you want to reflect on the project, so you create a slide bearing the heading 'Lessons learnt'.

Stop right there!

What are you doing? *Why* are you giving the slides headings?

Are you saying that, if it weren't for the heading 'Outcomes', your audience wouldn't realise it was outcomes you were discussing? Would you not use the word in your speech? Would it not be obviously from the content that outcomes is the subject?

If the answer to those question is 'No' (I won't use the words and/or the subject won't be obvious'), I say to you, without hesitation or qualification, you have a lousy speech.

The solution to having a lousy speech doesn't lie in writing headings: it lies in writing a better speech.

If you give your slides headings, the disadvantages will be:

1. you're doing what most people do: that is, you're doing things no better than the average. (The phrase 'bog standard' and the word 'mediocre' comes to mind.)
2. you're cluttering your slides with redundant information;
3. you're making it easy for the audience to decide to stop listening to you.

XIII) Three functions of slides

Slides can fulfil three functions:

1. they can act as a visual aid to enhance the audience's comprehension

2. they can act as a take-away, for the audience to refer to or pass on after the presentation. This may be in the form of a handout or an online post on, say, SlideShare.
3. they can act as a prompt for the speaker.

A moment's reflection is sufficient to realise that these functions are very different from each other. It follows that what will be optimal for one function will be sub-optimal for others.

For example, on a take-away you might wish to provide the full reference for a piece of literature you've referred to. A report or white paper, for example. You may wish to provide details such as the names of the authors, the title and sub-title, the publisher, and the place and date of publication.

But such data are hardly appropriate for the visual aid that your audience will be looking at during your presentation. The data aren't interesting to look at. And they clutter things up. So provide the full reference on the take-away, but not in the presentation.

Similarly, the needs of the audience differ from those of the speaker. What is the chance that nature has so ordered itself that the cues that would most help the speaker remember their presentation correspond with the cues that would best support (and entertain) the audience?

Zero.

The first implication of all this is: avoid using your visual aids as a prompt for yourself. Create your prompts in some other format: or simplify the presentation, and prepare it well enough, to avoid the need for prompts.

The second implication is, if you want your slides to fulfil more than one function, **you need to create _more than one set of slides_**.

Against this it may be objected:

1. 'That isn't what most people do'. To which the answer is that other people's amateurishness and laziness creates not a model for you to follow, but an opportunity for you to shine. If, for example, you say something like, 'I won't bore you with the completed references here, but on the version I've posted on SlideShare I've provided the complete references with a link to the publisher's site, plus a listing of supplementary publications', you'll look exceptionally professional.
2. 'This involves more work'. To which the (unsurprising) answer is that to achieve higher standards, you do often have to go the extra mile.

XIV) Stop talking

There's some information that you wish to present that works well in visual form. For example, a graph. You want your audience to access this information and understand it.

Which do you do:

1. present the graph (map, table, photographic image, etc.) and keep talking, to the audience has to decide **either** to ignore the image and listen to you **or** look at read the image and ignore you?
2. fall silent and allow them time to read?

You know the answer :)

XV) Mind the gaps

You've prepared a presentation. You've decided on this occasion to use slides – for example, because there are some maps that you wish to show. Now it's time to rehearse.

The typical behaviour is to run through the presentation slide by slide, working out what to say about each slide.

The problem here is that this ignores the question, what to say between slides? Narrative flow, continuity of argument, control of the presentation by the presenter (rather than Microsoft, the makers of PowerPoint) – all disappear down the cracks between slides.

Worse, the presentation is apt to come out sounding rather jerky. Each hiatus between slides feels like an awkward gear change.

The jerkiness will be even worse if, on beginning to talk about each slide, you use a phrase like 'Right' or 'OK' (or, worse still, 'So this one's about...').

If you attend a really good presentation that uses slides, watch how the presenter moves from one slide to another. Chances are, the transition from one slide to another will happen mid-sentence. All pleasantly smooth.

The implication is:

rehearse the transitions.