

Writing Your Presentation

Few of us feel entirely comfortable writing a presentation. There is something very daunting for many people about the process of moving your thoughts from your head to paper (or a series of slides on the computer). However, there are things that you can do to help yourself. These include knowing your material well and taking time to consider what you want to say.

Some basic starting points

There are two really important things to remember when starting to write a presentation:

1. Give your presentation an introduction, a main message, and a conclusion.

However, that is not the whole story. Your introduction needs to 'set the scene' a bit and give a broad outline of what you are going to cover in your presentation. If you are using presentation software such as PowerPoint, this should be a single slide. Your conclusion needs to sum up and present your main message to your audience, probably again in a single slide.

2. Think about using stories to get your message across

We are hard-wired by thousands of years of evolution to listen to stories. Stories helped us survive by reminding us about important behaviours. We therefore tend to remember them much better than dry lists of facts or bullet points.

It is much easier to work with this than ignore it.

There are two aspects of this.

- **First, you should try to think about your presentation as telling a story to your audience.** What is the point that you are trying to make, and how can you best get it across?
- **Second, it is helpful to use stories as part of your presentation.** For example, if you start by telling a story or anecdote, it will act as a 'hook' to draw in your audience. You can also use stories to illustrate each point you want to make. Of course, your story has to link to your main message, because you can pretty much guarantee that your audience will remember the story much longer than the conclusion!

Structuring Your Presentation

The structure and content of your presentation will of course be unique to you.

Only you can decide on the best way to present your messages. However, you might like to consider some standard presentation structures for inspiration:

1. Harnessing the Power of Three

In public speaking and rhetorical debate, as well as in much communication, three is a magic number. The brain finds it relatively easy to grasp three points at a time.

People find three points, ideas or numbers, easier to understand and remember than four or more.

You could therefore structure your presentation using the magic number of three.

For example, your presentation should have three main elements: the introduction, middle and conclusions. Within the main body of your presentation, divide your key message into three elements and then expand each of these points into three sub-points. If you are using a visual aid such as PowerPoint, limit the number of bullet points to three on each slide and expand on each of these as you go along.

2. What, Why, How?

An alternative structure uses the questions “What?”, “Why?” and “How?” to communicate your message to the audience. In a way, this also harnesses the power of three, but is a special case for driving action.

- **“What?” identifies the key message you wish to communicate.** Think about the benefit of your message for your audience. What will they gain, what can they do with the information, and what will the benefit be?
- **“Why?” addresses the next obvious question that arises for the audience.** Having been told “what”, the audience will naturally then start to think “why should I do that?”, “why should I think that?” or “why should that be the case?”. Directly addressing the “why?” question in the next stage of your presentation means that you are answering these questions and your talk is following a natural route through the material. This will ensure that you have the audience on your side immediately.
- **“How?” is the final question that naturally arises in the audience’s mind.** They want to know how they are going to achieve what you have just suggested. Try not to be too prescriptive here. Instead of telling people exactly how they should act on your message, offer suggestions as to how they can act, perhaps using examples.

You should try to back up what you say with evidence. You can use case studies, personal examples or statistics here, but try to ensure that you use them in the form of stories.

Editing Your Content

Once you have a first draft of your presentation, it is important to review and edit this.

This will help to ensure that it really does get your message across in the most effective way.

When editing presentation content, you should consider:

The language. Make sure that what you are saying will be clear to your audience. Remove any jargon and try to use plain English instead. If necessary, explain terms when you first use them.

Sentence structure. Use short sentences and keep the structure simple. Remember that you will be talking through your ideas and that the audience will be listening rather than reading.

The flow. Make sure that your presentation structure leads your audience through your ideas and helps them to draw your conclusion for themselves.

Use metaphors and stories to aid understanding and retention.

‘Hooks’ to get and hold the audience’s attention. Ensure that you have included several ‘hooks’ at various points in the presentation. This will help you to get and then keep the audience’s attention. These might be stories, or audience participation, or some alternative visual aids, such as a short video.

Check, and double check, for spelling and grammar. Make sure that any presentation slides or illustrations, titles, captions, handouts or similar are free from spelling mistakes.

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