

## Chapter 1

# Organising Your Presentation

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**T**he standard advice for organising a presentation or speech is: Tell the audience what you're going to say, then tell them, and then tell them what you've told them. We've heard many consultants offer this advice to their clients, look meaningfully into their eyes like they've just delivered some great insight, and then wait to be hailed as geniuses. But the problem with the tell-tell-tell formula is that it doesn't really tell you anything. (How's that for irony?) This advice is like telling someone that you build a ship by assembling a load of material so that it will float while you're in it. Okay, great. But how do you do that?

This chapter provides a detailed look at how to organise a presentation. We tell you everything from how to decide what to tell an audience, to how to arrange what you tell an audience, to how much to tell an audience. Actually, this is a tell-all chapter.

## *Selecting Material to Include*

Before you can organise your presentation, you must first choose the material for it. But your real task is deciding what *not* to use. No matter what your topic, you'll always be able to find a lot more material than you'll have time to discuss. And, more importantly, audiences have a limit to how much

material they can absorb. Here are a few guidelines to keep in mind when choosing what material to include:

- ✓ **Select a variety of material.** You know the expression ‘variety is the spice of life’? Applied to speeches, it means using a mix of types of material – anecdotes, statistics, examples, quotes, and so on. A variety of material makes your speech more interesting. It also increases the chance that each member of your audience will find something appealing.
- ✓ **Keep your audience in mind.** Choose material that your audience will understand and find interesting. The question isn’t what you know about the topic. It’s what does the audience need to know in order to make your presentation a success.
- ✓ **Carry a spare – always.** Keep some material in reserve – an extra example, statistic, or anecdote. You never know when you’ll need it, especially in a Q&A session following the talk.

## *Following Patterns of Organisation*

Imagine that someone hands you a piece of paper that says ‘m’, ‘d’, ‘u’, ‘y’, ‘m’. It doesn’t seem to mean much. (Unless the letters are supposed to be an eye test.) Now assume that the person hands you the paper with the letters arranged as ‘d’, ‘u’, ‘m’, ‘m’, ‘y’. Is your reaction a little different? Congratulations, you’ve recognised a pattern.

Patterns play a critical role in how we assign meaning and how we interpret messages. You could read a lot of perceptual psychology theory to figure out this stuff, but we’ll let you off the hook and skip it. Suffice it to say that human beings have a natural tendency to organise information into patterns. The way we shape those patterns determines much of the outcome of our communications with each other. So, the patterns you put into your presentation play a vital role in how well your audience understands what you’re communicating.

### *Sticking to two key rules*

If you want the pattern to strengthen your presentation as much as possible, abide by the following two rules.

### *Make the pattern obvious*

Have you ever seen those pictures that are all little dots? You know, the ones that you can't tell what the picture is supposed to be until you hold it close to your face? And then you're supposed to be able to see an image? Yes, the dots form a pattern because some people see the image, but the pattern really isn't obvious – at least to us and many other people who have never perceived the image.

Keep this fact in mind when you put together a presentation. You don't want a 'little dot' pattern that won't be recognised by everybody. You want a pattern that your whole audience can perceive. Your presentation isn't an intelligence test. You don't want to find out whether your audience is smart enough to discover your hidden structure. You want to make sure that your pattern is obvious so that your audience can perceive it – easily. Your pattern can never be too obvious.

### *Choose an appropriate pattern*

Consider your topic and audience when choosing a pattern. What pattern will best help get your message across? For example, if you're talking about the history of a boundary dispute in your neighbourhood, a chronological pattern probably makes more sense than a theory/practice pattern. (See the section 'Checking out commonly used patterns', later in this chapter, for more information on types of patterns you can use.)

## *Checking out commonly used patterns*

Although patterns are infinite in variety, certain ones appear over and over again. Here are a few of the most common patterns for presentations:

- ✓ **Problem/solution:** State a problem and offer a solution. For example, your presentation to a school's board of governors criticises the poor physical condition of the school. You then talk about a property scheme that could alleviate some of the financial pressures. What you emphasise depends on what the audience members already know. Do you need to make them aware of the problem or do they already know about it? Are there competing solutions? And so on.
- ✓ **Chronological:** If you plan to speak about a series of events (the history of accidents at that corner where you want a stop sign), organising your speech in a past/present/future pattern makes it easy to follow.



- ✔ **Physical location:** You may want to use this pattern if you're talking about things that occur at various locations. If you plan on giving the company orientation speech to new employees, you can divide the talk by floors (first floor, second floor, third floor), buildings (Building A, B, and C), or other physical areas (European operations, North American operations, Asian operations).
- ✔ **Extended metaphor or analogy:** This pattern uses a comparison of two items as a way of organising the entire presentation and is commonly used in speeches given by teachers or trainers. 'Today I'll talk about how giving a presentation is like the flight of an airplane. We'll talk about the takeoff, the landing, the flight, the passengers, and the control tower. The takeoff is the introduction . . .'
- ✔ **Cause/effect:** You state a cause and then identify its effect. This pattern is common in scientific presentations but it also works well for identifying where fault may lie. 'The southern region decided to listen to some management consultant this quarter. So it instituted new procedures, bought new expense-reporting software, and made a commitment to innovative sales methods. As a result, its gross sales declined by 50 per cent, and its margins shrank by 10 per cent.' (But the consultant had record profits.)
- ✔ **Divide a quote:** Each word of a quote becomes a section of the speech. Clergy often use this technique in sermons. 'The Bible says, "Wisdom is better than rubies". What does this really mean? Let's start with wisdom. Is it just your IQ? No. Most of us know people who have a high IQ who aren't very wise.' This technique is also frequently used by motivational speakers and sales trainers.
- ✔ **Divide a word:** Pick a word and build your speech around each letter of the word. 'Today, I'm going to talk about "LOVE". "L" stands for laughter. Laughter is very important in our lives because . . .' This pattern is popular with clergy, inspirational speakers, and consultants.
- ✔ **Theory/practice:** Start by explaining what you thought would happen – the theory. Then describe the actions taken and what actually happened – the practice. You can use this pattern when talking about something that didn't turn out as planned by explaining the big gap between theory and practice.
- ✔ **Topic pattern:** This is a free-form pattern that can be used for any type of speech. You divide your topic into logical segments based on your own instinct, judgement, and common sense. For example, you may use this pattern in a presentation on the topic of humour. The segments are: Why humour is a powerful communication tool, how to make a point with humour, and simple types of non-joke humour anyone can use. This easy-to-follow pattern makes sense for the material.

## Packaging and bundling



One of the most powerful ways to organise information is in the form of a numerical list. For example, you can say, 'I have some good ideas'. Or you can say, 'I have four good ideas. The first is . . .' The number makes the statement much stronger. Because the audience tends to keep track of numbers, using them grabs their attention, keeps their attention, and helps them follow along and understand what you say.

You can use this technique to organise your entire presentation, such as 'Ten Ways to Increase Productivity'. Or you can use it for individual segments, such as, 'We've talked about the importance of humour, how to write a joke, and how to tell a joke. Now let's talk about six simple types of humour that don't require comic delivery.'



Don't go overboard – keep your lists short. If you make the list too long, you can actually lose the audience. Suppose your boss walked into a meeting and said, 'I've found 50 ways to raise revenue. The first is . . .' How would you feel after you realised he was going to discuss every one of them?

## Creating Your Outline

An outline is a blueprint for your talk. It lets you see what points you're making, how they're related to each other, and whether they're arranged in a proper order. A good outline shows you how to construct a good speech. And like a blueprint for a building, an outline for a talk can take many shapes and forms.

### Figuring out when to start your outline

You have two basic choices regarding when to make an outline: Make the outline before you've written your presentation or after you've written it. People disagree on which way is best. But here's the secret. The best way is the one that works for you. Consider the differences between writing the outline before or after you write the text of your presentation, and then decide which approach works best for you:

- ✓ **Before you write the presentation:** With this approach, you focus on your purpose and identify the ideas that will achieve that purpose. Then you turn the ideas into major and minor points and fit them into

an outline structure. Only then, when you can see exactly what you'll say, do you begin to flesh it out. This is an absolutely logical way to proceed. If the outline makes sense, it helps ensure that the content of your presentation will make sense.

- ✓ **After you write the presentation:** Alternatively, you may just plunge right into developing your material word for word. You could think about the order in which you'd tell it to a friend, as well as what examples you'd use. Then write the outline after the presentation is written. This approach enables you to discover any flaws in your presentation's structure so that you can rewrite where appropriate.

## *Deciding the number of points to include*

The number of points in an outline should reflect the number of points in your presentation. So you need to decide how many points to divide your material into. To make the best decision, follow these guidelines:

- ✓ **Decide what the audience needs to know.** Determine which points are absolutely essential for you to include in your message. And we mean *absolutely* essential, as in, if one of these points were omitted, your speech couldn't succeed.
- ✓ **Avoid putting in too much information.** Many people try to pack too much information into a single speech. But a limit exists as to how much an audience member can absorb. Figuring out how much is too much may sound tricky but the following two guidelines can make the process easier on you:



- **Use no more than seven main points.** People disagree over the maximum number of points that you should have in a talk, but the highest number that we've found works in practice is around seven. Less is usually better. The amount of time you have to speak is also a critical factor. Many experts suggest three major points for a half-hour talk.
- **Reorganise to reduce the number of points.** You've gone through your material and found 15 main points that are absolutely essential. Don't even think about doing your speech that way. First, make sure that you really can't lose a few of them. Second, reorganise the points so that they're included under fewer headings. Think of 5 to 7 major points under which your 15 points can be subcategorised.

## *Timing*

Most people associate *timing* with how to tell a joke. But by timing, we mean how much time it takes to deliver the talk you've written. Does it fit the time

slot you've been given? Check out the following sections to find out the important concepts of timing.

## *Setting the length of your speech*

William Gladstone once observed that a speech need not be eternal to be immortal. His point is well taken: Longer doesn't mean better or more meaningful in the world of presenting and speaking in public. Waffle on for too long and you'll simply bore your audience. Follow these guidelines to make sure you set an appropriate length of time for your presentation:

- ✓ **Don't feel obligated to fill your entire time slot.** Use your common sense. You shouldn't stretch your speech to fill an hour-long time slot if you can get the job done in just 45 or 50 minutes. Your speech can end up sounding disorganised, and your points can get hard to follow when you throw in extra information just to cover another 15 minutes. On the other hand, one of us recently spoke at a conference where another speaker, who was slotted for a one-hour speech, completed his talk in ten minutes. As you can imagine, the conference organisers were less than thrilled.

Although concluding early can thrill your audience, concluding late can have the opposite effect. Even running on by just an extra five minutes could make the audience impatient and possibly angry. Your audience members are busy, and they don't appreciate a speaker putting them behind schedule. They expect you to be done on time, so don't disappoint them.

- ✓ **Twenty minutes is a good length.** If you can choose how long you'll speak, pick 20 minutes. This gives you long enough to cover a lot of information thoroughly, let the audience get to know you, and make a good impression. And the time's short enough to do all that before the audience's attention span reaches its outer limit.



## *Polishing your timing*

Einstein's theory of relativity may say that time and distance are identical, but many public speakers apparently disagree. They just can't go the distance in the time they've been allotted. You certainly don't want to join that group. So check out the following tips to ensure that you and your audience finish at the same time:

- ✓ **Estimate the time from the length of your script:** As a rule of thumb, one double-spaced page of 10-point type equals two minutes of speaking time. So preparing a standard 20-minute talk is like writing a 10-page essay. (Keep that in mind when the person inviting you to speak says it will be easy to do.)



- ✓ **Convert practice time into a realistic estimate:** Many speakers practise their speech aloud to get an idea of how long it will take to deliver. But be careful: For every minute that you practise your speech alone, it'll take you about a third longer when you speak in front of people. We tend to slow down because we wait for feedback and have to focus on making eye contact with the audience as well as presenting our materials. So a 30-minute talk could take 40 minutes. The duration of your presentation may increase by as much as 50 per cent when you speak to an audience of several hundred people. And if you're frightened when you face an audience, you may speak faster than you did while practising.



- ✓ **Make an adjustment for humour:** If you use humour in your talk and it's effective, part of your speaking time may be consumed by audience laughter and applause. Don't forget to account for that time, especially for large audiences numbering in the hundreds of people. With a large group, some of the group may get the joke straight away. Others may get it a little later. And the third group laugh simply because everyone else is laughing. So if your material is genuinely funny, be prepared to allow extra time for the waves of laughter or applause.



- ✓ **Be prepared to cut:** You were told that you'd have 30 minutes to speak. But the meeting doesn't go as planned and the organiser says you have only 15 minutes. What do you do? Of course the biggest mistake would be to try to cram your half-hour's worth of material into 15 minutes. Talking loudly and faster doesn't work! You will leave your audience with the impression that you are a bit manic. Perhaps worse, nothing will sink in.
- ✓ **Don't cut the conclusion:** When you need to cut part of your presentation, don't cut the conclusion. Your speech is like the flight of a plane, and the passengers are your audience. When you forgo the conclusion, you're attempting a crash landing. If you've been told in advance that your time will be shortened, cut material from the body of your talk. Eliminate some examples or even a main point if necessary. What if you need to cut while you're speaking and you're rapidly running out of time? Find a logical place to stop and sum up what you've already said. Even better, have a conclusion that you can go into from any point in your talk.

## Organising Your Presentation Effectively

As many ways to organise presentations and speeches exist as there are people giving them. But one of the simplest and most effective is to use cards, as follows:

1. **Write ideas on cards.** Begin by writing down each idea you have on a separate card. Write on only one side of the card to leave lots of room for editing. Say you're writing a presentation about training courses at work. One card may say, 'Get graph from human resources on uptake of current courses'. You may scribble 'comments from trainers' and 'list of currently available courses' on other cards. By the time you're done, you may have dozens of cards.
2. **Pile the cards into patterns.** So now you have a couple of dozen cards full of ideas. What next? Spread them on a big table or the floor and look for patterns. Try to group them into piles. For example, one pile may be 'benefits of the current training programme', while another may be 'downsides of the current training programme'.
3. **Sequence the cards in each pile.** Say you end up having six or seven cards in each pile. Keep rearranging the cards within a particular pile until you have a good flow between the cards. In doing so, you may find a gap in the sequence – say that cards 1, 2, and 3 work well but card 4 doesn't fit and needs rewriting before it flows into card 5. Another tip is to number the cards. Doing so helps you keep track of them much more easily. Perhaps label the piles A, B, C, and so on, and then number the cards 1, 2, 3 within each pile so they'll be A1, A2, A3, B1, B2, B3. This system doesn't mean A goes first, just that all the cards in that pile go together.
4. **Sequence the piles of cards.** Look at what you've got and see which pile is logical for starting your talk. Then look for the second, third, and so forth, until all the cards are in the best order.

## Short takes on long speeches

The long-winded speaker has inspired plenty of one-liners regarding the subject of public speaking. Here's a small sample:

- ✔ Many a public speaker who rises to the occasion stands too long.
- ✔ No speech is all bad if it's short.
- ✔ The longest word in the English language is 'And now a word from our guest of honour'.
- ✔ If the speaker won't boil it down, the audience must sweat it out.
- ✔ An after-dinner speech is like a headache – always too long, never too short.
- ✔ Having a train of thought is alright if you also have a terminal.
- ✔ Second wind: What a speaker acquires when he says, 'In conclusion.'
- ✔ A speech is like a love affair – any fool can start one, but it takes a lot of skill to end one.

## Relating to Your Audience



Establishing rapport with your audience is your primary goal – a feeling of mutual warmth and a sense that you’re on the same wavelength. The following sections present a few ways to achieve that goal.

### *Putting yourself in the shoes of your audience*

Imagine that you’re one of the members of the audience. What do they already know? What might they be interested in? Putting your audience at the heart of what you do – considering their needs and interests ahead of your own – is a great way to make them relate to you. In the following sections, we discuss some brilliant techniques for working out what your audience needs from you.

#### *Discussing the world from the audience’s point of view*

Let the audience know that you can see the world or issue their way. Look for common experiences that both you and the audience share. For example, if your job has ever encompassed any of the duties of your audience, you could describe work situations that create a rapport and allow you to see the world from your audience’s point of view. Or describe frustrating universal experiences such as traffic jams or dealing with faceless helplines.



People like to hear data related to what they do. So if you don’t have an experience to share, you can substitute a study. But first acknowledge that you don’t have the experience – or you’ll lose credibility.

#### *Making personal experiences universal*

Although an audience wants to hear about a speaker’s personal experience, using ‘I’ all the time can turn them off. You can end up sounding like a raging egomaniac. So go ahead and describe that experience – just find and emphasise the universal aspects of your personal experience. This advice applies to anyone using any kind of personal material — see the examples below:

- ✓ **Example 1:** ‘You know, I used to be a plumber. Let me tell you about the time I flushed a fish down the toilet and it got blocked up.’
- ✓ **Example 2:** ‘Did you ever have a job that you really hated but you couldn’t quit because you needed the money? I used to be a plumber. And I couldn’t quit because I needed the money. Let me tell you about what happened when a fish ended up getting flushed down a toilet and blocking it up.’

In the second example, the plumber tells the same story but the audience relates to him differently. Now he's not just a plumber talking about plumbing. He's a person who had a humorous experience with a lousy job – something everyone can understand.

### ***Customising your remarks***

Customising grabs the audience's attention and gets the audience involved in your speech. Tailoring your speech or presentation to a particular gathering makes the speaker a bit of an insider and lets the audience know that you went to the trouble of learning about them. And the good news is, a little (and we mean very little) customisation goes a long way. We've given speeches where we made half a dozen references geared specifically to a particular audience and were showered with praise afterwards for the research we did to learn about the group. Make comments – humorous comments, praise, or just simple observations – about local businesses, the people you're speaking to, an organisation's history, or local news, events, or customs.



Use your imagination and consider what may impress you if an outsider referred to it.



Don't be offensive! If you're going to use a name of someone in or related to the group, clear it with a senior person at the organisation first. If you plan on poking fun at anything else local, discuss it with someone first to avoid inadvertently offending someone in the audience.

### ***Pushing their buttons***

Purposely work in a reference to a hot topic – a source of minor controversy with the audience. Find an issue that affects the entire audience, not one that only affects key players and that no one else would understand. In addition, make sure that the issue isn't too controversial to mention – your contact will probably be reliable here.



One of the simplest ways to find a hot topic is to ask your contact whether any recent or pending legislation or initiatives will negatively affect the audience. When the answer is yes, you have your issue.

### ***Acknowledging what the audience is feeling***

If you're speaking under any special circumstances, acknowledge those circumstances. Is the audience sweltering in a hot, stuffy room? Would the audience prefer to be anywhere but listening to you? Has the audience made certain assumptions about you? Get the issue out in the open or it will remain a barrier between you and your audience.



### *Identifying and addressing audience subgroups*

Keep in mind that an audience may be made up of numerous subgroups – each with its own special needs and agendas. To create rapport with your entire audience, you need to include something for each of them.

### *Highlighting the benefits of what you've got to say*

Make sure that the audience knows what they're going to get out of your speech. Identify and emphasise the benefits early in your talk and issue frequent reminders.

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