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# **Getting the message to the audience**

**Presentation skills for scientists and those involved in science**

**By Jenni Metcalfe & Toss Gascoigne**

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## Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| A GOOD PRESENTATION.....                                | 1  |
| PLANNING PRESENTATIONS.....                             | 4  |
| KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE – THE MOST IMPORTANT STEP.....       | 5  |
| CONTENT: FRAMING THE MESSAGE.....                       | 9  |
| CONTENT: THE FIVE-BOX TALK.....                         | 11 |
| CONTENT: PREPARING THE INTRODUCTION.....                | 14 |
| STYLE: DELIVERING THE BEGINNING IF YOUR TALK.....       | 16 |
| CONTENT: THE BODY OF YOUR TALK.....                     | 17 |
| CONTENT: WORKING THE CONCLUSION.....                    | 20 |
| CONTENT: QUESTIONS.....                                 | 23 |
| CHAIRING A TALK.....                                    | 25 |
| STYLE: VENUE.....                                       | 27 |
| STYLE: VOICE.....                                       | 29 |
| STYLE: STANCE, BODY LANGUAGE, GESTURE, EYE CONTACT..... | 30 |
| STYLE: NERVES.....                                      | 32 |
| TEN TOP TIPS FOR DELIVERING PRESENTATIONS.....          | 34 |
| VISUALS: METCALFE’S FIVE PRINCIPLES.....                | 35 |
| VISUALS: PREPARATION.....                               | 37 |
| VISUALS: DELIVERY.....                                  | 38 |
| VISUALS: DIFFERENT TYPES.....                           | 39 |
| EVALUATION.....   | 43 |
| PROFORMAS.....  | 44 |
| MY OWN NOTES.....                                       | 47 |

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## A good presentation

A good presentation is like entertaining, coherent conversation – that is usually uninterrupted. It is conversation with a purpose. Work out the message and produce a talk that will deliver it. Your objective and the needs of your audience must be central to your presentation.

A good talk is not simply a good paper well read. It's different - in structure, content, length, and intention. Talks are delivered at one-third the pace that the audience can read; they cannot be re-read to check facts; and they may make use of a variety of audio-visual techniques to carry or enhance the message being conveyed.

### Differences between papers and presentations

| Characteristic   | Scientific paper        | Presentation   |
|------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Detail           | Very detailed           | Less detailed – key points only                              |
| Structure        | Formal – set by journal | Flexible – determined by needs of audience; often repetitive |
| Audience         | Remote, specialised     | Present, more general  |
| Presenter/author | Removed from audience   | Interacting with audience                                    |
| Language         | Formal, scientific      | Personal, colloquial   |

The best presenters bring **enthusiasm** to their presentations. You can forgive a presenter just about anything if they are enthusiastic. In our experience, scientists are generally not doing their work for the money; they have a passion and enthusiasm about their research. Bring this into your presentations.

Presentations by scientists are always a **battle of Detail versus Clarity versus Time**. Speakers try to cram in too much detail, and end up obscuring their main message or gobbling out the last sections to finish on time (or worse - running over time).

It is best to approach the task of giving a talk in a positive frame of mind. Think of it as an opportunity. Here is an audience that has

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chosen to make time to come to listen to you - make the most of the opportunity.

Your audience expects to gain some benefit from coming to see you. They want to be informed, educated or entertained. It is up to you to meet these expectations. Work out what benefit you can give the audience, and the best way you can deliver it to them. **The MOST important part of your presentation is always the AUDIENCE.** Start by thinking of them rather than how you are going to fit all your information into a PowerPoint presentation.

Good presentations depend on content, style and visuals and the notes that follow will explore these three aspects.

Think about presentations where you have been an audience member. What were the characteristics of a presenter that captured your attention and interest? What about a speaker that bored you and made you wish you were somewhere else?

If you look at your list and characterise each item according to whether it relates to content, style or visuals, you'll find that style is the most important element separating an effective speaker from a less effective one. While the substance or content is critically important, the way it is delivered separates the great speakers from the just OK or boring speakers. Notice that visual aids are the least important element in an effective presentation. But, where do most presenters start their preparation? What do they rely on the most?

### **Characteristics of an effective speaker**

- € Enthusiastic - style
- € Engages the audience – style/content/visuals
- € Uses eye contact - style
- € Uses natural gestures – style
- € Appropriate use of humour - style
- € Uses language suitable to the audience – style/content
- € Is relevant to the audience - content
- € Delivers interesting relevant information that sticks to the topic - content
- € Well structured, clearly ordered information - content
- € Uses visuals that add impact or help explain a complex concept - visuals

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**A less effective speaker**

- € Fiddles with objects - style
- € Ums and ahs - style
- € Tends to look away from the audience - style
- € Reads the presentation - style
- € Uses too many visual aids - visuals
- € Has cluttered, hard to read visual aids - visuals
- € Speaks in a monotone voice - style
- € Has an illogical arrangement of ideas - content
- € Tries to fit in too much information or detail - content
- € Goes over time – content/style/visuals

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## Planning presentations

All effective presentations go through a planning phase. The following checklist is a guide to how you might want to plan your presentations. However, it doesn't necessarily go in sequence – for example, the venue may determine to some extent the structure of your talk.

- Audience analysis – what does the audience want from your talk?
- Set your objectives – what key ideas do you want to get across? How does this match the audience's needs?
- Gather data, ideas and material – what is the content of your talk?
- Arrange the data in a sequence that is clear, commands attention and is persuasive – what is the structure of your talk?
- Super-prepare your introduction to help you give a confident start
- Prepare a strong exit line for your conclusion
- Think carefully about signposting your presentation so the audience knows where you're taking them
- Prepare the visuals to fit into the talk
- Read through the talk you have prepared and rehearse the full presentation – use variation in voice and gesture, and be aware of body language; be prepared to cut back on content
- Check again that the information you have prepared will meet the likely expectations and needs of your audience – is there a benefit for them from listening?
- Check out the venue – do you know how to use the equipment?

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## **Know your audience - the most important step**

The most important part of your presentation is your audience. However, this is what speakers, particularly nervous speakers, often forget when they plug in their 'life support system', their PowerPoint.

What sort of audience are you addressing? Will you be addressing business executives in a presentation seeking external funding with only 10 minutes to sell your project? Is the audience a group of farmers, well intentioned, educated to vastly different standards and largely cynical about the ability of technical people or governments to help them?

Or will it be a committee of some sort, numbed by a day of presentations now running way behind schedule, and in which the four speakers who spoke before you tried to cram in far too much information? Will it be colleagues from your organisation, who are likely to have good understanding of your work and the related issues?

If the audience is decision-makers, pressed for time and interested in benefits, then put the important messages first. For audiences interested in precise detail, you might want to start with the details and then explain what these mean.

### **The audience checklist**

1. Who will be there - age, education, experiences, preconceptions background?
2. How many people will be in the audience?
3. What are they expecting?
4. What do they know already about your subject?
5. Do they want to be there?
6. Will they be able to understand technical terms and expressions?
7. At what time of day is the presentation?
8. What has gone on before your presentation? (The fourth paper that morning?)
9. What questions are they likely to ask?



10. What do you want to get from giving the presentation?

11. What do they want to get from your presentation?

### Analysing your audience – what do they want?

| <b>Peers (scientists)</b>   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Content</b>  | <b>Style</b>   | <b>Visuals</b>  |
| New information<br>Relevance to their work<br>Opportunities for collaboration/linkages<br>How it fits the 'big picture'               | Formal in a conference; less so in a smaller meeting<br><br>Some jargon OK – but avoid specialist jargon<br><br>Rhetorical questions work well<br><br>Appropriate humour | Do want some visuals – graphs with error bars<br><br>Diagrams, pictures<br><br>Some text OK |
| <b>Senior managers/business executives</b>  |  |   |
| <b>Content</b>  | <b>Style</b>   | <b>Visuals</b>  |
| The bottom-line<br>What you want them to do<br>Benefits, costs<br>Opportunities<br>Fit with strategic directions<br>Specific examples | Formal<br><br>Succinct<br><br>Jargon-free<br><br>Get the most important information out first  | Graphs showing trends only<br><br>Statistics<br><br>Few or no text                          |

| <b>Farmers/Fishers</b>  |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Content</b>  | <b>Style</b>   | <b>Visuals</b>                                  |
| Benefits – especially in terms of \$\$\$<br>Options<br>Local relevance<br>Details of what they need to do<br>Local examples | Casual, but professional<br>Colloquial language<br>Jargon free<br>Interactive  | Actual objects<br>Pictures, diagrams<br>No text |
| <b>Community group/general public</b>   |  |   |
| <b>Content</b>  | <b>Style</b>   | <b>Visual</b>                                   |
| Big picture<br>Local relevance<br>Interesting facts/quirky details<br>Personal stories<br>Examples                          | Casual, but professional<br>Use of appropriate humour<br>Colloquial language<br>Jargon free<br>Interactive, where possible | Pictures<br>Objects<br>No text                  |