

# Effective Presentations: More than Just PowerPoint

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## ABSTRACT

Ever dreaded giving a presentation? Have you ever wondered why you get so many blank looks during a presentation? Have you ever looked at someone else's PowerPoint slides and wished you could communicate as effectively? Have you ever run out of time before you get halfway through a presentation? Then this is the paper for you. Topics covered will include: how to start; organizing your presentation; developing your presentation; tips for making a bigger impact with PowerPoint; and speaking.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is the text for an effective presentations seminar first given in 2001. The seminar and slides have been updated based on the evolution of presentation theory, projection equipment, and presentation software. There are as many ways to create (and give) presentations as there are presenters, and many well-developed theories on presenting. Most of the thoughts in this paper are based on my personal experience. I learn something from every presentation I give, and just as much, or more, from every presentation I see.

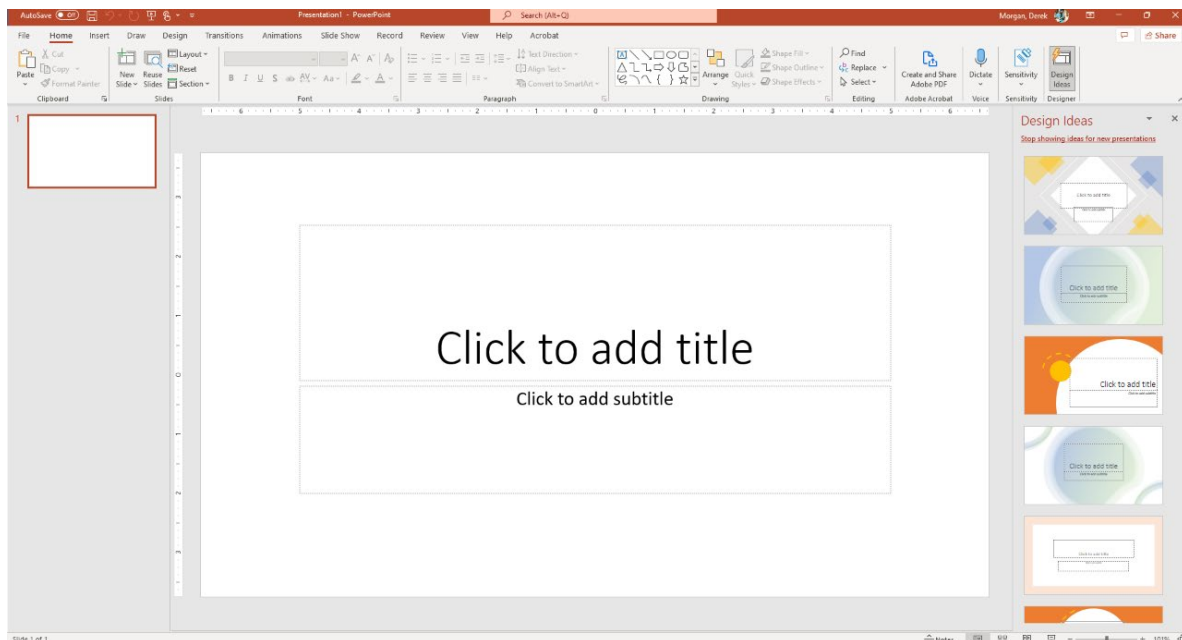
This is not a PowerPoint how-to, or a guaranteed three-step method to creating presentations quickly and easily. The first thing you need to accept is that building an effective presentation takes time. If you're looking for tips on overcoming fear of public speaking, I only have one: [Toastmasters International](http://www.toastmasters.org). You'll also find this link in the recommended reading.

Again, I emphasize this isn't the only way to create a presentation, but I hope you'll find some of the tips as useful as my students and I have.

## THE WORST PLACE TO START YOUR PRESENTATION

When many people find out they have to do a presentation, the first thing they do is open PowerPoint, where they are immediately greeted by this:

Figure 1: "The screen is blank, as is your mind..."



I don't know about you, but I find this intimidating. As soon as I see this, I feel the urge to put something down just to get rid of the... blankness. Before I know it, I have four slides of disorganized information, and spend a lot of time trying to fix and sequence those PowerPoint slides—then I keep making changes up to the last minute. To avoid this, I leave slide making to stage three of what I call...

## THE FOUR STAGES OF A PRESENTATION

When you're faced with a complex or downright frightening task, the first thing to do is to break it down into its components and work through each one in order. Presentations are no different. You can think of a presentation as having four stages. They are, in order:

1. Concept
2. Design
3. Development
4. Delivery

If you think of each stage as a separate task, it's much less daunting to focus on one of those tasks, rather than three of them (usually design, development, and delivery) as one big, tangled package. Follow these steps, and you'll find your presentation flows better. Just take one step at a time.

### CONCEPT

This is the "big idea," or "big picture" you're going to present on. It can be as broad as a general topic you need to research first or as specific as presenting study results. It can be something you've done at work and want to share, or something you're very familiar with and want to teach. The goal of this step is to clearly define *what* you're going to talk about, not *how* you're going to talk about it.

### DESIGN

After you have a good idea of what you're going to talk about, you're going to spend some time breaking it down into smaller pieces. The best presentations I've seen cover the material as a specific series of points. It can be ten tips on using SAS more efficiently, or a description of a complex web application. It can even be whimsical, like how to program for job security. But each of those followed a logical flow. They led the audience through a process, or provided a clear, concise description and explanation of each tip or topic. It may be tempting to skip this step, but the more time you spend here, the more familiar you'll be with your presentation when you get to the development and delivery stages. When you have a clear vision of what you're talking about, so will your audience.

### DEVELOPMENT

This is where you define the purpose of each slide, then create the content of each. I find this is the most complex step, because this is where you start considering the main external factors that affect every presentation: time, type of presentation, and audience.

How much time you've been allotted is the most important factor in determining how to construct your presentation. Your presentation won't be very effective if you only cover half of your topic. On the other end of the spectrum, if you cover everything in ten minutes when you're supposed to speak for an hour, you'll leave the audience wondering, "Is that all there is?" If you've done a good job in the design phase, then you'll know whether you have more time than you need, less time than you need, or nowhere near enough time as you practice. General guidelines for handling these three scenarios are:

- If you have more time than you think you need, you can cover more points, or go more in-depth on the points you have. You have the choice to expand the range of points or explain your points in more detail. Be careful that you don't add too much, or you may find yourself with less time than you need.
- If you have less time than you think you need, then you cover fewer points, or go into less detail.
- If you have far less time than you think you need, then you can only give the highlights, or a big-picture view of your most important points.

If you're thinking all three of these are asking you to judge what you feel is most important, and then add, remove, or abbreviate... why wouldn't they? After all, it is *your* presentation.

The type of presentation is important because it affects the overall tone of your presentation and clarifies what you're trying to accomplish. The clearer you are about this in your own mind, the stronger your voice will be in the presentation. I lump them into three general groups, although there is usually significant overlap between at least two:

- When you're presenting information or results, I consider this an *informational* presentation.
- If the primary focus of your presentation is technical, such as an industry conference or in-house coder's corner, then it is a *technical* presentation.
- When you're teaching, it's a *classroom* presentation.

Finally, you need to consider your audience. What do they expect out of your presentation? How much engagement will they have coming in, and how much engagement do you need to build? If you're talking to peers and colleagues, they usually have an idea of what you're talking about, and they're interested, otherwise, they wouldn't be there. They tend to grasp simple points quickly and are more interested in the details.

When you give a presentation to higher-ranking associates such as managers, study leads, directors, and even all the way up to CEO, it usually means you have information they want. This group has many demands on their time, so make sure you don't waste it. Present the most important information concisely. This group will prefer to spend less time on details, and more time discussing what to do about the issues raised by the information you give them.

With students, assume little or no knowledge, but make sure you have a way to bypass basics if they're more adept as a group than you anticipated. Plan on covering less and getting more questions on what you're covering. Make sure you leave time between your main topics for those questions. It will help them feel engaged, and not like they're just listening to a recording with a quiz at the end.

By this time, you should have the timing question answered, established an overall goal for your presentation, and its tone. You're several steps closer to creating an engaging, effective presentation than you were when you started. Now for the information filter. You need to figure out the absolute minimum information needed for each point or topic you're covering. If your topic needs examples, pick one good example for each point. You should also put yourself in the listener's shoes and think of obvious questions they might ask around each topic.

Congratulations! Now you have a main topic for each of your slides and can fill in detail as the time you have will permit.

Finally, every presentation should have a beginning, where you clearly state your overall goal and set the audience's expectations. A presentation should also have an obvious ending. This can be a summary of what was covered, and you can easily get that from your design stage. Finally, you should plan some sort of allowance for questions. Don't be afraid of questions. Questions mean people have been listening and thinking about what you've said. And if you've been paying attention during your slide design, you might even have a general idea of what people will ask, or what you didn't have the time to cover in detail that they still would want to know. Questions mean you've reached your audience and connected with them, which is a sign of an effective presentation.

## **CREATING SLIDES**

Now that you know what your slides are going to be about, you can start putting them together. In this section, I'm going to go over some basic principles. I also discuss some ideas about presentation theory and note how this has changed over the past twenty years. I'm going to use PowerPoint for these examples, but these ideas are applicable to any presentation software. All presentation software is just a tool. Don't rely on your slides to make your presentation. *You* are the presentation, and the slides are there to help you.

## WHAT ABOUT USING AI TO CREATE MY SLIDES?

AI may give you slides, but you'll be presenting the AI's slides. I've found it's much more difficult to present someone (or something) else's slides than my own. Therefore, I'm going to reiterate two previous points: don't rely on your slides to make your presentation. *You* are the presentation, and the slides are there to help you. Because of that, I would never use AI to create a presentation I'm giving. Also consider that you won't ever develop the skill to create your own slides with your own personality and viewpoint if you only rely on an AI tool.

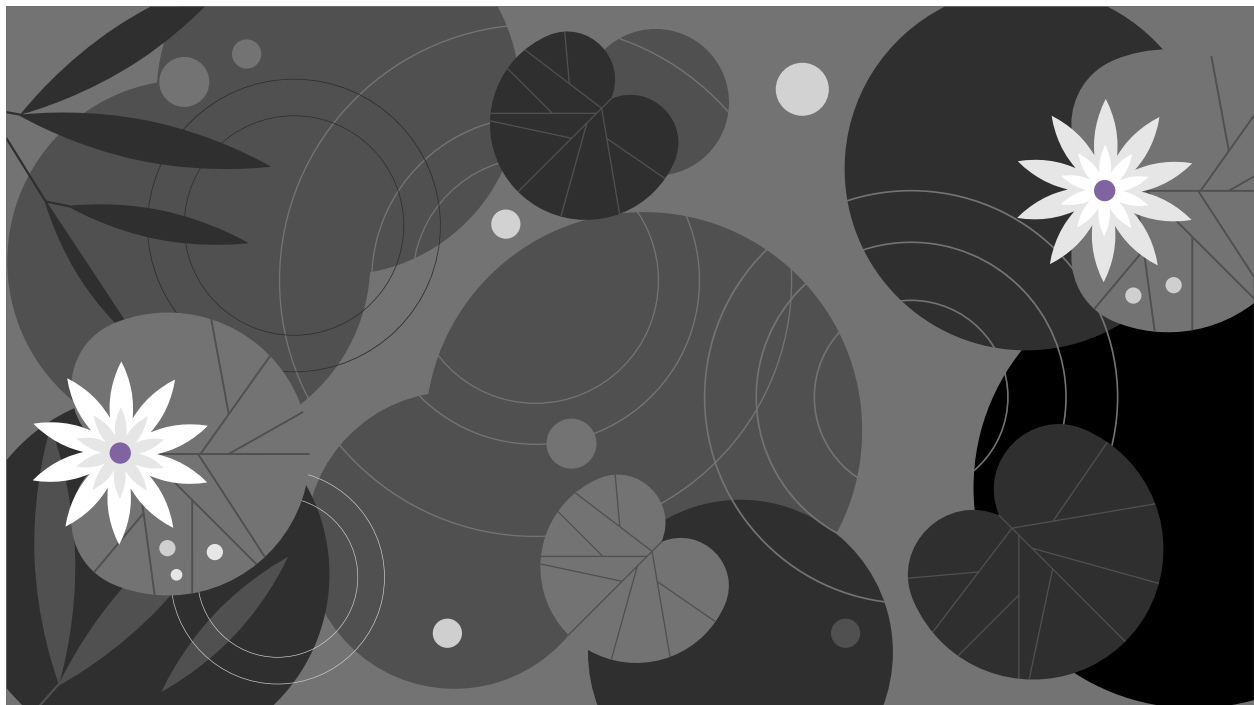
If you see it as a valuable shortcut, then try it. I strongly urge you to try it the long way at least once and compare both presentation experiences.

## “A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS”

This isn't just an old saying; there's science to back it up. Images convey information far better than words do. There are some trains of thought on presentation theory that say you should only use images in your presentations to focus the audience on what you are saying. I don't dispute that. As soon as people see text on a slide, they're immediately going to read it. While they're reading, they're only half (even less than that, according to research) listening to what you're saying. (Remember this, it's going to come up later.) If you want people to focus completely on what you're saying, don't give them anything to read. This is an extreme paradigm shift from what most people think of when they hear “presentation.”

The only problem is people have come to expect slides with text. I'm not brave enough to go completely against audience expectation. Say that you've developed a process that will save the company a billion dollars annually. Your immediate bosses are so enthusiastic and proud of you, they've scheduled you to present your idea to the company's leadership team, including the CEO. Ask yourself, “Is this the situation I want to make a stand on modern presentation theory and present Figure 2 while I talk about my money-saving idea?”

**Figure 2: The “Unrelated Image” Theory**



Again, I'm not that brave, and I wouldn't expect most of us to be. I believe audience expectation should play a large part in designing slides.

However, it is still true that the less text you use in your slides, the more the audience will listen to *you*. Use pictures and graphics as much as you can, or as much as you're comfortable. As long as you know

what you're going to say for every picture or graphic, the audience will have a good experience. Don't use pictures or graphics in place of words during your presentation, though. That will confuse everyone, including you.

## HOW MANY SLIDES SHOULD I HAVE?

I start out with a general plan of one slide per minute, maximum. This goes up or down based on the complexity of the overall concept and how much detail I want to cover on each slide. I've had long presentations (particularly when teaching) that have one slide every two or three minutes, and short presentations that average more than one slide per minute because I don't have many points to cover on each slide. As you give more presentations throughout your career, you will get a better feel for how you present, and this assessment will become easier. One thing I also consider is called the "so what?" test. As I review my slides, I think about what I'm saying for each one from the audience's perspective. If I go, "so what?", after reviewing a slide, then it doesn't need to be part of the presentation. I usually go through this process at least a couple of times during slide development, and once I have my slide deck more or less finalized, I'll go through it again. This helps me keep the audience focused on the overall concept. If I delete slides that don't have an impact, that gives me more time to discuss the important things.

## SOME BASIC TIPS ON DESIGNING SLIDES

- Use fonts that are easy to read. Limit the number of fonts you use. Only change fonts in the text of the slide to make or reinforce a point. Even then, try to keep the same font and change font characteristics such as size, color, italics, or underlines.
- Bigger is better. Simply put, larger fonts are easier to read, and can be seen by people in the back of the room.
- Don't pack your lines in a slide, and don't use less than single spacing between lines to make everything fit on one slide. Use the "So what?" test on each of your points.
- Don't put too much on a slide. It's a good idea to leave blank space at the bottom and the sides of your slides. People at the back of a conference room may not be able to see the bottom of the screen at the front of the room, and those closest to the walls may not have a good angle to see what's written toward the edges of the screen. Don't be afraid to split a slide into two (or more) slides.
- Your bullet points should be high-level summaries of what you want to discuss. Add lower levels as you step into more detail. I recommend a maximum of three levels on a slide.
- If the order of the items matters, use numbered lists. If the order doesn't matter, use a bulleted list. Or imply order by making your points appear in order.
- Don't put full-text explanations of the points you're going to cover on your slides. That will make the audience read a lot, and they will get tired if you do it throughout your presentation. Worse, what usually happens is that you end up reading the text on your slide and have nothing else to talk about. But the audience has already finished reading your entire slide, so they've already checked out on what you're saying.
- In the same vein, if you're presenting on code you've written, try to avoid putting code into the presentation. In general, if your code is more than ten or twelve lines, it probably won't fit onto a slide without shrinking it beyond the audience's ability to read it. Also, listening to someone talk about syntax is *boring*, unless the syntax is the entire point of your presentation. If you must show code, use short code snippets, and talk the audience through the set-up leading to the code before you explain it. If you're talking about an application, instead of showing the code, talk about what the application does. If you want to share the entire code, provide it in an appendix in your paper, or share it on the web and provide a link. Make sure the code you share is well-commented; you won't be there to explain what it does after the conference.
- Don't let the background interfere with your text. If a background image makes any of your text hard to read, consider eliminating the background image. It's just a background.
- Use high-contrast colors. However...

I have a very strong personal preference for light text on a dark background. I find it easier on my eyes. A white background means the brightest color on a slide conveys no information while occupying most of the slide. I've also walked into hallways with muted lighting after seeing white backgrounds for a couple of hours in a dark conference room. It takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust, and I'm a hazard to myself and those walking around me. That having been said...

## TEMPLATES

Templates are good. I *always* use a template. It gives presentations a consistent look-and-feel, which is one less thing to distract the audience. *Is that title in a different place than the last slide?* I've developed a personal template for my presentations and use it whenever I can. It takes a little bit of time and effort to create a personal template, but I believe it's worth it.

However, many presentations have specific templates for me to use. Most companies have corporate presentation templates, and conferences may also have their own templates, which are usually found in the presenter resources area.

Most companies have rules about using their templates. If you work for a company, it's simple: follow those rules, even if you disagree with the template's design. For conferences, use the conference template if one is provided (as long as your company allows you to use a non-corporate template). If your company insists you use their template at conferences, make sure it's appropriate for use outside the company. For example, if your company template has something like "For Internal Use Only" on its slides, then it's inappropriate to use at a conference. If this happens, refer to your corporate communications department for further guidance.

## "A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS", PART 2

While a picture may be worth a thousand words, it doesn't do any good if the audience can't see it well. Anything you want to discuss on a graph or chart should be visible from twelve to fifteen feet away on a 20-inch screen to make sure it's easily visible in a conference room. If you're creating on a mobile device or small laptop, then you should adjust that 12-to-15-foot distance, but don't try to get too fine. Too big is always better than too small. I've also seen presentations that put text onto background shapes instead of bullet points. Given the natural inclination of people to read words, it will frustrate them if they can't read the text on your shapes.

## ANIMATION

I like using simple mouse-click animation to display the main points on my slides. That stops me from rushing through them during the presentation. I group the appearance of bullet points to guide me through each point, keeping me focused on delivering only what's appeared on the screen, not the entire slide. It also keeps the audience from reading ahead and spending the rest of the slide texting or thinking about anything other than what I'm saying, and that adds value to the audience's experience. Does this take time when I build my slides? Absolutely. I just remind myself that it makes presenting easier for *me*.

- Don't use special effects just because you think they're cool-looking. The audience can (and will) easily spend more effort watching your animation than listening to what you're saying.
- If you think I'm saying, "Don't use animations," I'm not. Just make sure you're using them to make, illustrate, or reinforce a point.
- Animations take time, so when you practice, let the animation finish as you would when you'll give the presentation. If you don't, you may run out of time when giving your presentation because you skipped two minutes' worth of animations during your practice.
- Don't be afraid to remove animations or special effects if they take too much time.
- Don't be afraid to remove an animation if you can't make it work EXACTLY the way you want. You'll be thinking about it when it comes on screen, and think, "I wish I could've made it..." That means you won't be thinking about what you were going to say while it's going on. Anything that distracts you will distract your audience.

- Avoid flashy animations. They're visually painful. Even if you think you need to wake the audience up.
- I don't like slide transitions, especially when you're giving a presentation in a timed environment like a conference. Remember, animations take time. You and your audience will wait anywhere from one to three seconds waiting for your next slide to appear. Nothing else is happening during that time. It takes momentum away from you and your presentation. It could cost you a full minute of presentation time over twenty slides.
- Sounds always take longer than you think. Nothing else is happening while your sound effect is playing. No matter how short your audio clip is, it brings your presentation to a complete stop just like slide transitions do.

## ACCESSIBILITY

When I started creating presentations, accessibility wasn't usually a consideration. Now, PowerPoint has an accessibility checker; like any general tool, this checker won't find everything, but it's a good start. The U.S. government has [guidelines](#) for creating accessible presentations. Microsoft has [PowerPoint accessibility information](#) on their support website, and you can also find many websites with information on how to make your presentations more accessible. With that in mind, here are some guidelines I've compiled from the digital accessibility websites from Harvard University and my alma mater, Washington University. The original text can be found via the links in the References section.

- **Use an Accessibility Checker:** Use the Microsoft Accessibility Checker to create accessible documents. It's available in Word, PowerPoint, and Excel. You can find it displayed in the status bar at the bottom of the Microsoft program. View the issues it found by selecting the Accessibility icon button in the status bar. Automated checkers don't catch every issue, and they remind you to think about accessibility when creating or editing your content.
- **Add File Metadata:** Add Metadata for your file to clearly identify it to your audience. Give the file a clear title and file name. Identify the language of the document. To add metadata, Select File→Info, and edit the properties.
- **Write Unique and Descriptive Slide Titles:** Slide titles provide an outline and improve navigation, making presentation more accessible. Each slide should have a unique title. For slides that cover the same topic, try something like {Topic} 1 of 3, {Topic} 2 of 3, {Topic} 3 of 3.
- **Format Text for Legibility:** Format text so that it is easier for your audience to read. Consider using a sans serif font. Set line spacing to 1.25, or even better, 1.5. Keep text left-aligned when possible, allowing users to identify new lines easily. For slide presentations, don't use anything smaller than 18pt for your lowest level.
- **Break Content into Lists:** Where possible, browse your presentation to see if any slide would be easier to read as a list. Lists make content easier to read by providing visual structure and highlighting key points. To add a list, use the paragraph panel to apply a bulleted or numbered list.
- **Write Descriptive Links:** Write link text so that it is unique, descriptive, and clear about where the link goes. If you're sharing documents for printing, consider including both a descriptive link and the full link text. To edit link text, select and highlight the text you would like to link. Right click and chose edit link text.
- **Add Alternative Text to Images:** Add alternative text for all non-decorative images to convey the equivalent information to someone who may not be able to see the image. Keep it short and descriptive. Don't include "image of" or "photo of". Add alternative text by right-clicking on the image to bring up a menu with the options "Add Alt Text" or "Edit Image."
- **Use High Color Contrast:** Some of the automated accessibility checkers will alert you to color errors as you work. You can also download a desktop tool, such as [TPGi's Color Contrast Analyser](#).

- **Avoid Using Color Alone to Convey Meaning:** If you only use color to convey meaning, your message may be missed or misunderstood by individuals who can't see color. Use color along with a secondary element, (such as shape or text differences) to ensure the meaning can be understood. Also avoid using red or green on your slides: those who are red-green colorblind won't see it.
- **Review the Reading Order of Content on Each Slide:** Verifying the reading order ensures that screen readers and assistive technology can read material in the order it is meant to be presented. Use the tab key on each slide to see content selected in the order that it will be read. How to change the reading order: inspect and change the order on each slide using the "Selection Pane" Tool. Slide Title should be at the bottom of the list. Reorder your slide elements by right clicking on each and selecting "Order" and then sending elements backwards or forwards. Slide Title should be at the very "back".
- **Use tables only when necessary.** Accessible tables need at least one header (row and/or column) and an alt-text description summarizing the table.

You can find accessibility-enabled PowerPoint templates all over the web. Accessibility considerations should affect your slide design. With the increase in virtual presentations and the improvement in assistive technology, it's important to recognize you need to communicate with everyone. Slide preparation is more important now than ever. Yes, this means you will spend more time building your presentation, but it will improve the experience for *everyone* in the audience, and that makes it worth it.

## DELIVERY

This is the part that scares people the most. Standing in front of an audience and giving a presentation seems intimidating. If you're afraid of public speaking, the only way to get over that fear is to do it. Like anything else, the more you do it, the better you will become at it. This is true of public speaking in general, and any presentation you give—but I'm getting a little ahead of myself.

I don't have a surefire method for getting comfortable with public speaking, but there is an organization dedicated to helping people become better with speaking in public situations, and they've been doing it since 1924: [Toastmasters International](#). Click on the link to go to their website and see what they're all about. Find a chapter near you. Maybe your company has one (or more) in-house groups you can join. Some companies will even pay your dues for participating in a company-sponsored chapter. Although I am not affiliated with Toastmasters International, I believe this is one of the best investments you can make to develop yourself professionally. Even as an experienced speaker, I participated in a company-sponsored chapter several years ago. I've seen it transform the shy and reluctant into confident speakers. It also made me a better speaker, because it made me practice outside of conference presentations and training sessions. They can teach you to become a better speaker, which will make you a more effective presenter far better than I ever could in a simple paper.

I do have some observations and thoughts that can help you. If you've followed the previous steps from concept to design, you're ready to start the delivery phase of your presentation. This phase starts well before you and your topic get introduced to an audience. Giving your presentation only comes at the very end of the delivery phase. Preparing to give your presentation is more important than giving it.

## PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!

Preparing to give your presentation is as simple as those three words. I had a friend who saw me clicking through my slides in the hallway, and he asked what I was doing. I told him I had a presentation in ninety minutes and was practicing. He said, "But you're a great presenter! You don't need to practice."

I replied, "What do you think makes me such a good presenter?"

You cannot rely on your slides to be your presentation. Slides are a just a tool to help. You need to know what you're going to talk about, and what you want to say about it. At the same time, you don't want to come off sounding like a recording. I like to remind myself that my slides aren't just for my audience; they're for me as well. They remind me *what* I'm going to talk about as I go through the presentation, but not necessarily *how*. I don't worry about memorizing every word of my presentation, which is added pressure I don't need. The biggest problem with memorization is that any distraction, or even audience



questions, can make you lose your rhythm or your place, and before you know it... poof! Your mental script has vanished, and now you have to make up your presentation on the spot.

Don't rehearse with the intent of memorizing the material. Rehearse with the objective of familiarity with the material. This is where I start to develop the *how* for every point on my slides. As you go through your slides, get a good idea of how you're going to expand on each of your points. You put each point on the slide for a reason; just remind yourself what that reason was, and then use that as the basis for what you're going to say during the presentation. This is also a good time to put yourself in your audience's shoes, because you can think of the common questions that might show up during points on your slides. Sometimes you'll adjust your slide to add a point to cover that question.

I don't use notes or prompts, but you can. Be conscious that this can easily turn your presentation into a reading, because focusing on your notes can disconnect you from your audience. Audience feedback is important in a presentation. Are you conveying the information they want or need? Are they following you? Are they lost? If you're always reading something (on paper or on the screen), you risk losing sight of that feedback.

Constantly remind yourself that your presentation isn't about you. It's about the information you're giving, helping to solve problems, and giving the audience something to take home. The focus isn't on you. This may help you put everything in perspective as you practice.

How much should you practice? I don't have a quantifiable answer. You should practice well enough that you know what to expect each time you click the mouse, what you're going to say about each point, and be comfortable doing it.

I like to go through my slides in the hour before I give a presentation. If you see me during that time, it may look like I'm clicking through my slides too rapidly for it to do any good, but I'm reminding myself of the slide flow and reinforcing the mental notes I've made over the weeks leading to the presentation. It's all practice. Few presenters can create a slide deck and deliver it in a smooth, engaging way without it.

## **OK, THEY'VE FINISHED INTRODUCING ME. NOW WHAT?**

You've diligently practiced, your slides are ready (you even may have made some literally last-minute changes), and you've got your presentation down cold. Now is the moment you've been preparing for with equal amounts of anticipation and dread. How do you stand in front of people and talk? Let's start with the reason you're here in the first place. After all, you didn't do all this work to talk to yourself.

## **THE AUDIENCE**

First of all, the audience is *not* your enemy. They're your *partners*. They expect to get something from your presentation, and they want you to succeed. They aren't waiting for you to fail. They're not there to make fun of you. Remind yourself of that when you start to worry. There's an implied contract between you and your audience. Both parties have responsibilities, and if you live up to yours, they'll live up to theirs:

**Table 1: The Contract Between Speakers and Audiences**

	<b>Speakers' Responsibilities</b>	<b>Audience's Obligations</b>
1	You know what they want/need to know	They know why you're there
2	You won't underestimate them	They will ask relevant questions
3	You will stay at the heart of the matter	They will treat you with courtesy

The audience knows why you're there, so you don't need to keep telling them (point 1). Don't talk down to your audience. If you treat them like they're intelligent, they'll keep their questions relevant (point 2). If you don't go off on unrelated tangents and make them feel like you're wasting their time, they'll be courteous (point 3).

Empathy and equity are key to being a good presenter. If you want to know how you're doing, look at your audience. If the audience looks lost, stop and ask for questions. Members of the audience may also have something to say; accept their contributions with professionalism. However, if a particular audience

member is starting to monopolize your time, politely remind that person you are in the middle of a presentation and have more points to cover for the entire audience. Offer to connect after the presentation and have a private discussion.

The audience will pick up silent cues from you as much as you do from them. They will know:

- How you feel that day. To paraphrase Alistair Cooke, “A professional is someone who does a good job even when they don’t feel like it.” Give your audience all the energy you can muster.
- If you don’t like them. If you don’t want to be there, you shouldn’t be there.
- When you’ve memorized your presentation. There’s a fine line between knowing your topic and having it memorized. The audience is there to see or hear you, not a recording.
- When you’re not prepared. This is easy for an audience to spot. It’s also easy to avoid. Put in the work to prepare for your presentation. Don’t just “wing it.”
- When you’re lying. At some point in your career, someone is going to ask you a question you can’t answer or point out an error in your presentation. If you don’t know the answer, don’t waste time by trying to make something up. Say you don’t know, and then offer to research the answer and follow up. If it’s an error, don’t try to talk your way out of it. Accept it, thank the audience for the correction, and move on.
- When you’ve given up on them. Audiences know when you think they’re never going to get what you’re talking about. Don’t let yourself begin to think they’re stupid. That *will* turn the audience-presenter relationship hostile. This is especially important when you’re working with students, or people who are new to your area of expertise. Don’t talk down to your audience. If they’re “not getting it”, probe for questions and revise your talk in mid-presentation to cover fewer points. Conveying some information is better than conveying none, even if it’s not as much as you intended or hoped.
- When you’ve given up on yourself. No matter how poorly you think you’re doing, don’t give up on your presentation, even if you’ve forgotten most of it. Regroup and move forward. You can’t change any mistakes you’ve made, but you can focus on making the rest of the presentation as good as possible.

Remember, the audience always wants you to succeed, and if you treat them like a partner, they will make presenting easier.

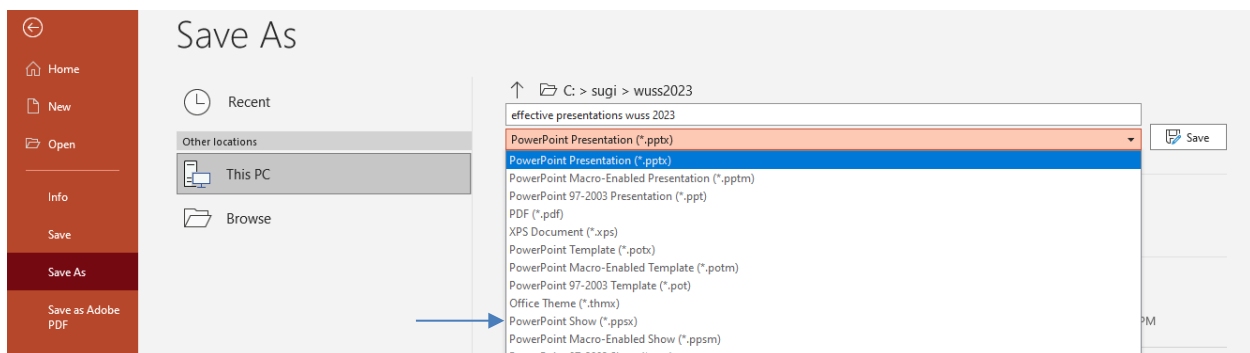
## **USEFUL TIPS FOR PRESENTING**

I’ve accumulated this series of tips from experience and discussions with other presenters.

- First and foremost, remember to breathe. This will keep you from going too fast, and more oxygen means you can think better while you give your presentation.
- Pacing is critical. Don’t give the audience a verbal dissertation on your points. Say what you want to say and keep going. If you spend a lot of time on a single point, not only will you risk running out of time for the rest of the presentation, you might also exhaust the audience’s patience. They’ll get bored and start paying attention to anything except you.
- It’s OK if you forget something you wanted to say on an earlier slide. Unless it’s vital to the rest of your presentation, move on. The audience will ask questions if they don’t understand.
- Don’t read your slides word-for-word. The audience reads much faster than you can talk. This is probably the hardest tip to follow. I still do it at least once or twice every presentation, no matter how much I tell myself not to do it. Honestly, make every effort to avoid this, but don’t be too hard on yourself if it happens. Just resolve to do better next time.
- The worst time to self-critique your presentation is in the middle of it. Do any self-evaluation *after* you’ve finished. The audience may think you’re great while you’re busy dissecting every mistake you made.
- When you give a presentation, face your audience. Don’t turn your back to the audience and talk to the screen or the wall behind you.

- Most people have a “strong side.” That is, most of us aren’t comfortable standing perfectly perpendicular facing the crowd. We stand at an angle, with one foot ahead of the other. Don’t worry about learning to overcome this. You need to be aware of it and make a conscious effort to make eye contact with the entire audience, especially the people who aren’t on your “strong side.”
- Speaking of eye contact, make sure you don’t spend all your time looking at the laptop or the presentation screen. This is why I dislike presenter mode on PowerPoint. It creates a big temptation to script your slides, then read your notes while you’re presenting. If you’re always reading your notes, you’re not connecting with your audience.
- Avoid talking about yourself too much. That reference to what you did that didn’t go the way you planned can turn into a long (relatively speaking) monologue.
- Don’t try to be funny. Don’t script jokes into your presentation unless you’ve been going to open mike nights at comedy clubs on a regular basis. Forced humor usually falls flat. You can make a joke during a presentation, but it has to feel natural to the audience.
- Don’t lean on the podium. When you do, it tells the audience, “I’m tired.” That isn’t the impression of you that you want them to take away from your presentation. Personally, I dislike podiums. It feels like a barrier between me and the audience, so I usually present from anywhere but behind the podium.
- If you’re planning on connecting to the Internet during your presentation, make sure the room you’re presenting in will have an Internet connection before you plan on that live demo. Some conference venues charge extra for connectivity in their meeting rooms, and some conferences won’t pay for it. This is becoming less common, but it’s still a possibility, so I would check with your point of contact to verify that you will have Internet in the rooms. Even if there is connectivity, it’s never one hundred percent certain. Have a backup plan. There could be an ISP failure that day. Alternately, the connection speed could be much slower than you thought, which means everything in your presentation that relies on the Internet will take longer. The more time spend waiting on the Internet, the less time you’ll have to cover your topic to the degree you want.
- I always create a copy of my PowerPoint PPTX file as a PowerPoint show (PPSX.) Then I run my slide deck from the PPSX. When I do this, I don’t need to open PowerPoint itself to show my slides. This is very helpful when I want to show another application, like a browser window, during the presentation. I open any other application(s) I’ll need before my presentation starts, then start the PowerPoint show. During my slide show, I can press ALT-ESC to get to those other applications without stopping the presentation. When I’ve finished with the other application, I press ALT-ESC to get back to my presentation without having to restart it inside PowerPoint. You create a PPSX through the “Save As” dialogue, and instead of the default “PowerPoint Presentation” select “Power Point Show” as shown in Figure 3:

**Figure 3: Creating a PowerPoint Show**



## ABOUT VIRTUAL PRESENTATIONS

Virtual presentations aren’t like in-person ones. The audience interaction is missing. For some people, it’s good they aren’t in front of an audience. They feel less pressure and are less nervous as a result. I find

virtual presentations more difficult because I can't look at the audience and tell how I'm doing. I can't see questions on people's faces.

However, the audience is still there, and you need to acknowledge them. If you're doing something physical, you still need to convey that in some way. If your presentation has audio, just remember your virtual audience may not be equipped to hear it.

Laser pointers only work inside a room. The virtual meeting platform you use may have a virtual laser pointer you can manipulate. If not, you may need to figure some way to indicate your key points on a slide. This is where creating elaborate animations may help. Again, if you can't get an animation to work exactly the way you want, don't do it.

Animation, video, and audio in virtual presentations can be tricky. Don't count on your audience experiencing your slide show as you do. Their experience may be affected by any combination of lag, the video compression of the virtual meeting platform, or an individual viewer's technology. Simplify your animations. If possible, use photo slides instead of high-resolution video since it may be distorted or out-of-sync with its accompanying audio at the viewer's end.

## ONE FINAL TIP

The last tip I have on presenting is about confidence. Remember, you know this stuff. *You* chose the content. *You* put it together. *You* designed the slides. *You* practiced. You're ready. You got this.

## CONCLUSION

As I said in the introduction, there are as many ways to create presentations as there are presenters. This paper isn't the definitive way to make a presentation. This process works well for me, and I think some of my tips are relevant to any presentation. Mix and match as many of these tips and tricks as you like. You can also take a class on this topic from someone much more qualified than me. Creating and delivering presentations is just like anything else: the more you do it, the better at it you'll become.

If you're new to presenting, just remember the four stages: Concept, Design, Development, and Delivery. Breaking your presentation into those stages, regardless of the details I've given for each stage, will make what seems an intimidating task easier. You won't spend as much time worrying about what to put on your slides until you've locked in what you're going to talk about. Then, don't worry about what you're going to say about it until you have your points written on slides.

Don't forget Toastmasters International if you have trouble with public speaking. Even if you don't, it's a great forum for getting better at it. If you want to get better at public speaking, the best way is by doing it more often.

Finally, great presentations don't just happen. Preparation and practice go into every great presentation you've seen; those presenters didn't just throw a bunch of slides together and wing it. If you want your presentation to communicate effectively, it starts with preparing the points you want to communicate and the visual media you're going to use to demonstrate those points. After that, you practice so your audience understands the points you're making. Then they'll walk away from your presentation thinking, "Wow! What a great presentation!"

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## RECOMMENDED READING

Toastmasters International, <http://www.toastmasters.com>

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