

# Public Speaking and Strategic Narratives for Leaders

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## *Business Presentations*

### Public Speaking

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Speaking to a group, whether in a private or a business setting is a daunting experience for most people. One reason it's so difficult may be that we remember all the bad / boring / useless / tedious presentations we ourselves have had to listen to, and we don't want to inflict that pain on our own audience.

It's important to overcome this fear, though, because being able to speak fluently and persuasively to a group, whether it's a quick, small gathering, or a formal business presentation, is one of the most valuable skills you can possess.

### Avoiding Death by PowerPoint

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A good place to begin is to think about why so many workplace presentations are so bad. The reason is usually very simple: the presenter doesn't understand the function of an oral presentation. Remember that there are many ways you could get information out to your group. You could send an email; put up posters; write an article for the company newsletter. So, *why* are you gathering everyone together and taking up their precious time by talking to them in person?

For starters, if you want your audience to *understand* your message most of your other options are *terrible*. Busy people barely read their emails (all the way through, at least), and any message you send is likely to get lost in the clutter of an overcrowded Inbox. Same for newsletters, group texts, etc.

However, the spoken word lets you both command your audience's attention and instantly respond to their doubts and questions. Done well, an oral presentation delivers your message far more effectively than any other channel. Only with a presentation can you make personal contact with your audience, see how they're receiving your message, and adjust it accordingly. Only an oral presentation lets you back your message with the force of your personality through personal anecdotes and examples from your own experience. Only in an oral presentation can you show how much your topic matters to you and ensure the most important aspects of it are emphasized and understood.

If you're not doing this — if you're not watching for the reaction of your audience and adjusting your speech accordingly — then there's no reason to be using an oral presentation. Send a group text or email instead and accept the reality that half the recipients won't read it. The whole point of gathering your audience together is that you can speed things up if they seem bored, add another anecdote or re-state an argument if they seem unconvinced, and answer questions when people misunderstand or objections when they have issues you hadn't thought of.

Too many speakers don't understand this. They get in front of their audience and merely read a previously prepared script or drily run through a previously prepared message without any audience interaction. This is such a common problem in the business world that it has come to be known as “death by PowerPoint”.

But, if you understand that the whole point of a spoken presentation is your ability to respond to audience feedback, then you will realize that public speaking is a very particular skill. If you take some time to practice and develop this skill, you will never have to worry about your audience suffering “death by PowerPoint”.

### Business Presentations

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That said, a good presentation begins with good planning. Before you even start thinking about slides or other visual aids you should be very clear about what your purpose is and who your audience are:

- Why are you gathering your audience together and taking up their valuable time?
- What is your core message, the essential takeaway you want everyone to leave with?
  - Are you informing them of a new policy, event, or other development?
  - Are you motivating them?
  - Looking for feedback?
- Understanding your audience will help you anticipate how they will receive your presentation:
  - How technically knowledgeable they are will influence your choice of language.
  - How much they know will change how much background you need to provide.
  - How receptive they are will influence how persuasive you need to be.
- Prepare your material thoroughly: research, organizing, making notes, etc.
- Rehearse your presentation out loud, including checking your timings.

## Organizing Your Material

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As you start drafting your presentation an outline will help you organize your material. This lets you sketch out your main points, group your subpoints within main points, and easily move them (tip: Microsoft Word has an Outline Mode). Remember that it's harder to keep track of structure when you're listening to a presentation than reading a document. So, at the highest level, your presentation should be organized to reinforce you them and main points as follows:

- Introduction: introduce your theme with a summary of what you'll say.
- Main body: two or three main points (that follow logically from one another).
- Conclusion: summarize what you've just said and reinforce your theme.

This basic organizational structure can be summarized as: “tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them, then tell ‘em what you just told them!”

## The Introduction

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The introduction has three jobs to do:

- Get the attention of your audience (with an attention-getter or “hook”);
- Build your credibility with your audience; and
- Summarize your main points and themes.

If your attention-getter doesn't capture your audience's attention, it won't matter how good your content is. Some common opening gambits are:

- A promise.
- Drama.
- Eye contact.
- Movement.
- Questions.

You also need to introduce yourself and establish your credibility. This could be through:

- Mentioning your credentials or experience.
- Describing how you've faced the same dilemma as your audience.

Finally, it will help get you started if you have your first few lines memorized. After that you should speak naturally and conversationally, with pauses, and modulating your voice.

## **Structuring the Main Body**

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To help the two or three points of your main body flow logically from one to another, you should organize them in the most appropriate way:

- Chronological.
- Geography/space.
- Topic/function/conventional grouping.
- Comparison/contrast (pro or con).
- Value/size
- Importance
- Problem/solution
- Simple/complex
- Best case/worst case

Include verbal signposts to let your audience know when you're moving from point to point or to the next stage of the presentation:

- “If there are no more questions, I'll move on...”
- “Summarizing this point...”
- “If you thought that was good, wait till you hear what happened next...”

## **Summarizing in the Conclusion**

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You're not done once you've brilliantly presented your main points. The conclusion of your presentation is vitally important; it's your last chance to reinforce your theme, clear up any misunderstandings, and leave the audience energized and with a positive impression. You should:

- Summarize the main themes of your presentation.
- Take questions (and avoid “yes, but...” answers).
- Distribute any handouts (it is often best to hold this till the end).
- Thank the audience.
- Close with a statement that gets you off the stage gracefully, while maintaining control until you are finished (it's easy for a presentation to fall apart at the end):
  - An expression of appreciation.
  - Some words of encouragement.
  - Best wishes.

## **Keeping Audience Attention**

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Build a rapport with your audience so you can keep their attention throughout the presentation:

- You can start with a promise to be fulfilled by the end.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Be animated and move; get out from behind the podium.

- Pause every now and then for questions.

Effective Imagery will make your language more vivid and help keep attention:

- Analogies.
- Metaphors/similes.
- Personal anecdotes.
- Personalized statistics.
- Worst-and best-case scenarios.
- Other examples.

Your nonverbal cues are also important:

- Look professional.
- Punctuate your words (use pauses, be dynamic).
- Vary your facial expression.

## Visual Aids

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Nowadays people think of PowerPoint when they think of visual aids. But the overuse of PowerPoint means your audience will be grateful for anything else you might bring:

- Props.
- Photographs.
- Charts.

If you do use PowerPoint, remember that it is there to *reinforce* your argument. You are the one presenting, and it is your words that make the argument. Only you can see if the audience is falling behind, and slow down or repeat an explanation. Or, if the audience has got the point and it's time to move on. Slides cannot respond to the audience as you can and so are best used for two things:

- Keeping your audience oriented as to where they are in the presentation.
- Providing visual examples to reinforce your points.

If you put too much detail on your slides, you'll lose your audience. They will start reading from the slides and wondering what they need you for when everything's on screen.

Your slides should be simple and attractive:

- No more than a couple of typefaces.
- Use a common colour theme and design from slide to slide.
- Don't overdo wacky transitions or sound effects that distract from what you're saying.
- No more than four or five points per slide if you do use bullet points!
- And: don't commit "death by PowerPoint!"