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Presentation Skills

Stop Scripting Your Speeches

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by Joel Schwartzberg

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Illustration by Jason Schneider

"Don't worry," a coaching client once told me shortly after I saw her rehearse her presentation. "I'll have it completely written and memorized by next week!"

To my trained ears, she might as well have been saying, "Don't worry, I'll make my task pointlessly hard and ensure a distant connection with my audience!"

Like many people, she thought a "good speech" is something you write out word-for-word and read aloud — perhaps even memorize. Some

learned this approach in school. Others inferred it from seeing stirring, perfect speeches from politicians, award recipients, and fictional television characters.

If you have a team of speechwriters working for you, you should certainly have them work their magic and then take your position behind glassy teleprompters to serve it up. But that's not the majority of us. Most of us give presentations more frequently in business meetings, online conferences, and a wide range of small- to mid-size internal and external events. In those typical settings, *writing*, *reading*, and certainly *memorizing* a word-for-word speech is actually one of the most destructive and counterproductive tactics you can take as a presenter.

Below are some of the biggest pitfalls of fully writing, reading, and memorizing speeches, as well as what you should be doing instead to accomplish what should be your main goal — engaging and inspiring your audience.

Writing Focuses on the Wrong Things

While a speaker's primary goal is to engage and inspire, many communicators are inclined to write out their speeches because they mistakenly believe their goal is *to be perceived as a fantastic speaker or writer*. This mindset has nothing to do with getting your point across or doing your job, and sends you down a path of performance ("I want to impress you"), not presentation ("I want to convince you").

In most cases, writing a full speech is also pointlessly time-consuming. For every important concept you raise, you're crafting many extra lines to set up and contextualize those ideas. These words and transitions should come naturally and sound human, but when read word-for-word, they can come across like the voice on a robocall — friendly but noticeably stilted and artificial.

A presentation audience doesn't even have time to process — much less remember — specific words and phrases, so time spent conceiving and writing "the perfect words" is largely wasted on them, even if it brings comfort or pride to the speaker.

Finally, writing a full speech is a process that excludes the audience, whereas delivering a speech with limited notes involves and incorporates the audience into the experience. This concept is critical, because humans are more apt to give attention to speakers who seem to, or actually do, demonstrate a sincere interest in them. "The key to delivering a successful speech is showing your audience members that you care about them," says Steve D. Cohen, an author and professor at Johns Hopkins Carey Business School. "If you maintain an audience-centered approach, your listeners will reward you with appreciation."

Imagine someone recommending a movie to you. Should that person look you in the eye and explain what makes the film compelling, or should they go home, write and edit a review, come back, and then read the finished review to you? Now imagine that person recommending not a movie, but a brilliant new marketing strategy, a breakthrough vaccine delivery system, or a campaign to save the earth. As an interested human being, you want to hear them make that case live and in their own spontaneously-generated words, not read something created apart from you and without you in mind.

Reading Builds a Barrier

Reading a speech word-for-word has its own unique disadvantages. It reduces the amount of eye contact you have with an audience, whether in an in-person meeting or on a Zoom call. Reading also diminishes your ability to speak with personal conviction because, when you read a speech aloud, your mind is not focused on enlightening or inspiring your audience; it's focused on the task of reading hundreds of carefully

chosen words in succession. It isn't easy to read words and project fervency simultaneously, but when you remove the script, you restore the human connection between the speaker and their audience and enable more emotional transmissions.

In more than 15 years of watching and training speakers, I've rarely seen someone read a speech as compellingly as someone who presents a live point. Again, audiences typically zone out when a presenter is reading, because they feel cut out of the process of interpersonal communication.

Even the TED Commandments — a list of do's and don'ts allegedly given to TED speakers — includes Commandment #9:

> ***Thou shalt not read thy speech.***
> *"Probably the worst of all public speaking sins is the temptation to disappear into your notes and read, as opposed to speak, to your audience. If they wanted to be read to, you could've just sent them an email with your speech content."*

Speaking spontaneously, with authentic conviction and awareness, signals that you have *something to say* — a point you feel so strongly about that you're willing to express it personally and out loud. That sounds powerful, because it is.

Some people insist on writing full speeches to calm their public speaking anxiety. After all, how can you mess up when all you need to do is read 932 words in order, sprinkling in some emphasis and eye contact? But when you focus mostly on getting from the first word to the final 932nd, the whole point of public speaking is reduced to a robotic task.

Sacrificing audience impact to preserve your comfort and security is not a sustainable approach. The best way to overcome public speaking fear is to embrace your purpose, not shrink from it.

Memorization Is Asking for Trouble

When you memorize something, you are still reading — now with the script in your head instead of in your hands — and the slightest memory failure can cause you to lose your place and throw you off. Even small memory lapses and bobbles may reveal to your audience you're reciting from a script, which can injure your credibility, your authenticity, and their respect for you as an invited presenter.

Why risk forgetting something you memorized or bearing the engagement handicaps of writing and reading when there's a much easier, quicker, and more effective way to prepare, practice, and present? For me, that better way consists of four basic steps:

1. Start with an Outline

Your grade school teachers were right: Every good communication starts with an outline — a roadmap that indicates the points you must hit on the way to your destination. The most effective outlines start with a proposition (I'm selling you an idea), followed by points that support that proposition (I'm showing you why the idea is beneficial to you).

The more you practice, the shorter that outline should become as you realize you require fewer and fewer reminders than you thought you needed.

2. Create Useful Notes

Eventually, your outline becomes so small and concise you can fit it on an index card. That's your notes. Your notes are your cheat sheet, feeding you major points and essential details you might otherwise forget. I often tell my clients to construct their notes as they would a

shopping list, complete with bullets, abbreviations, and no complete sentences.

On a shopping list you don't write, "Buy three fresh avocados from aisle four in the produce section." You write "3 avocados."

In fact, your notes should be so personally coded for your personal use that they read as nonsensical to someone else.

The good thing about having notes versus a script is that, after looking up at your audience, you can look down and easily track where you are and what you need to say next. But if you lose your place between, say, words 439 and 440, it will take a conspicuous amount of time to recover.

3. Practice Effectively

You already know that practice is important, but it's crucial to understand the difference between effective and ineffective presentation practice. Ineffective practice is thinking about your speech and mumbling the words, which only helps you *know* your presentation better. Effective practice is having your mind and mouth work together to *convey* your speech aloud and in real time. This tactic comes closest to simulating what you'll be doing when you deliver your speech for real.

You don't need a person, a mirror, or a camera to practice effectively — just you, your mind, and your mouth, practicing by physically presenting.

4. Trust Yourself More Than Your Script

You speak without scripts in your workplace all the time: in meetings, job interviews, performance reviews, conference calls, and more. If that's true, then you spend a lot of time trusting yourself, your experience, and your credibility when you speak spontaneously. Use

that understanding to confidently realize you never need a word-for-word script to make compelling points.

When you know your points well, prepare good notes, and practice the right way, you'll understand that conveying your ideas live and unscripted is easier, less scary, and more effective than you thought.

That leap of faith is also a leap of progress. Anyone can read a script. Leaders champion their ideas.

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