



Business Communication



# How to Give a Stellar Presentation

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**Speaking in front of a group** — no matter how big or small — can be stressful. Preparation is key, of course, whether it's your first or your hundredth time. From [preparing your slides](#) to wrapping up your talk, what should you do to give a presentation that people will remember?

## What the Experts Say

Public speaking often tops the list of people's fears. "When all eyes are on you, you feel exposed," says Nick Morgan, the president and founder of Public Words and the author of [Power Cues](#). "This classically leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment." In other words: fear of

humiliation is at the root of our performance anxiety. Another problem “is that speakers often set a standard of perfection for themselves that they will never live up to,” Morgan says. “And then depending on how neurotic they are, they’ll spend the next few hours, weeks, or years thinking: ‘I should have said this,’ or ‘I should have done that.’” But presenters shouldn’t “fear a hostile environment” or second-guess themselves says Nancy Duarte, the CEO and principal of Duarte Design, and the author of the *HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations*. “Most often the audience is rooting for you,” she explains. They “want to hear what you have to say” and they want you to be successful. Here are some tips that will help you deliver.

### **Understand your audience**

As you begin to work on your presentation, think about your message and content from the listener’s point of view. “Research your audience,” says Morgan. “Understand their points of pain, what they’re interested in, their fears, needs, and wants.” Don’t think of your presentation as a chance to show off your expertise. “Instead, think about it as an opportunity to take your audience on a journey” in which you provide new perspectives and ideas, he says. Go in “with the mindset of a mentor,” adds Duarte. “Think about why your audience is coming to hear you speak. Ask yourself: what can I give them? What tool can I provide?”

### **Open with conviction**

According to Morgan, the three classic mistakes speakers tend to make often happen in the first few minutes of a talk. The first mistake is introducing yourself — especially in a longwinded fashion. The second is telling the audience what you’re going to say — often in a form of a PowerPoint agenda slide. The third is what Morgan refers to as “throat clearing” — where you stand up and say things like: “Gee, it’s nice to be here. Wasn’t that a fun party last night? I see a lot of familiar faces

in the audience.” These things might make you feel more comfortable “but you’re just babbling at the audience,” Morgan says. And more importantly, you’re squandering the opening few minutes that are a key to engaging the audience. “Your goal is to immediately grab their attention and draw them in.”

### **Tell a story**

A growing body of [research points to the power of stories](#) to change our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Bear this in mind as you create your slides and talking points. “Stories wrap information in meaning and help your audience absorb your message in a memorable way,” says Duarte. First-person anecdotes about overcoming hardships or obstacles “[build tension](#),” and give the audience something or someone to cheer for, she adds. The common alternative to stories — overloading your audience “with lists and slides of data and facts” — often results in glazed and distant looks, adds Morgan. “Stories will appeal to them on a deeper emotional level.”

### **Seek to inspire**

Even when your talk is internal and your content is mundane — a presentation before your team about a product roadmap, say — your message shouldn’t be humdrum. “You could talk about the roadmap in chronological order and discuss the various deliverables, or you could remind your team of what *could* be and remind people how they are solving a problem bigger than themselves,” says Duarte. Your presentation should still focus on the topic or task at hand but by bringing in concepts like “meaning and purpose, you create a longing to get the job done” and do it well.

### **Think positively**

Your physiological signs of stage fright — racing heart, clammy palms, and churning stomach — are “keenly felt by you, but are far less visible

to the eyes of the audience,” says Morgan. “You must remind yourself that you don’t look as bad as you feel.” And when your brain starts in on a feverish loop of negativity — *I’m a fraud, This talk is going to go horribly* — you need to counteract it. “Replace the negative thoughts with positive ones,” he says. “Tell yourself: ‘I’m going to be fine. I am passionate about this topic. I’ve given this talk plenty of times before.’” You might feel silly the first time you speak to yourself this way, but “positive self-talk really helps,” Morgan says.

### **Review and rehearse...**

One of the best ways to get ready for an important speech is to practice it in front of a live audience. This needn’t be a professional coach: a friend or group of colleagues will suffice, says Morgan. After the rehearsal, “they can give you feedback on how you’re parsing your content and coach you on which sections of the presentation work best,” and which need improvement, says Duarte. For high-stakes talks, try to visit the venue where you’re presenting so you can get a feel for the stage and the environment. Duarte also suggests asking someone to film your rehearsal. “Then go over the footage together to identify idiosyncrasies and improve your gestures and facial expressions.” The goal is to make sure “your body tells the story you want it to tell.”

### **...But not too much**

Sometimes practicing too much can backfire. “Your audience will feel insulted if you haven’t prepared, but you can also over-prepare and end up coming across robotic and contrived,” warns Duarte. “Once you’ve practiced it enough and you feel good about the material, let go of the script and talk from the heart.”

### **Principles to Remember:**

## **Do**

- Research your audience and keep listeners' wants and needs in mind as you sharpen your content
- Practice your presentation in front of friends or colleagues and be open to their suggestions on how to improve
- Think positive thoughts by reminding yourself of your passion and interest in the topic

## **Don't**

- Babble, especially at the beginning. Open strong by grabbing your audience's attention in the first few minutes
- Worry too much about appearing nervous; stage fright is natural and your audience will probably be forgiving
- Overburden your audience with facts and figures; tell stories and anecdotes that will appeal to your listeners on an emotional level

### **Case Study #1: Polish your story and then practice, practice, practice**

In early 2013, Ted Karkus, the CEO of ProPhase Labs, the makers of Cold-EEZE lozenges, received a last-minute invitation to speak at a large investor conference that was only a week away. Ted would be part of a panel with executives from two other companies — both of which were about five times bigger than ProPhase.

“It was nerve-racking when I found that out, but then I realized: ‘I can talk passionately about this company because I believe in this company,’” he says. “But I also knew I needed to practice beforehand. I believe the degree of preparation is directly related to the quality of a presentation.”

While working on his talk he was guided by the principle “every slide should tell a story.” He did not want to overwhelm the audience with numbers. “We’re a public company — if people want numbers they can look on the internet. Instead, I wanted to talk about my goals and the history of Cold-EEZE.”

And he was confident that the story was compelling: When Ted took over the brand in 2009 after a long proxy battle, sales were spiraling downward. Not only did he have to cut a large percentage of his workforce, he also had to plead with retailers not to cut shelf space for his products. But after a “herculean turnaround effort” that included a new marketing strategy, new packaging, and an expanded product line, sales were growing rapidly.

Ted did not prepare for the speech alone. Around that same time, he was going to be in a TV commercial for Cold-EEZE, and he had hired an acting coach to help him. “I happened to bring my presentation to the rehearsal, and the coach spent a lot of time with me on it and taught me how to memorize my talk and still seem natural.”

About an hour before the speech, an investor asked Ted for a one-on-one meeting. “It gave me a chance to go over the presentation,” he says. “It helped to say it out loud one last time before I went on stage. Afterward, I reminded myself that talking to this one person wasn’t much different from talking to 200.”

Ted’s talk was a big success. Before he left the podium, about a half-dozen audience members approached him with ideas for the company.

## **Case Study #2: Find your theme and think about what will inspire your audience**

In 2010, Michelle Reed — then chief marketing officer for a higher

education software company — was asked to give the keynote address to kickoff her firm's weeklong customer event. About 8,000 people would be in the audience.

"I was terrified, frankly," she says. "I wanted to do well and I wanted to make sure my message would resonate."

The theme of the conference was: "Today's priorities. Tomorrow's possibilities." Her aim was to get the audience thinking about how to improve students' experiences using technology. "Higher education is about making a better life for yourself and for your family and ultimately making the world a better place," says Michelle. "It was an aspirational, passionate message that I wanted to get across."

As Michelle began to develop her content, she mined her life for examples. "I told a personal story of my experience registering for classes as a college student in the 1980s, which posed a stark contrast to what it was like for my kids in the mid-2000s," she recalls. "When I registered for courses, I literally slept on the streets of Philadelphia, and when my number was called, I went into a room and ran around from table to table to try to find courses. My kids registered for courses online from the comfort of their dorm rooms...I wanted to demonstrate a strong understanding of how far we've come but I also wanted the audience to be thinking: 'Wow. What's next?'"

The talk was well received and the experience has made her more confident. Today Michelle is the CMO at SkillSurvey — which provides reference assessments to help employers make better hiring decisions—and regularly has to give presentations to large groups. "I always try to focus on my audience members," she says. "I think: How will they receive it? What do they care about? And what am I trying to compel them to do?"



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**Rebecca Knight** is a journalist who writes about all things related to the changing nature of careers and the workplace. Her essays and reported stories have been featured in The Boston Globe, Business Insider, The New York Times, BBC, and The Christian Science Monitor. She was shortlisted as a Reuters Institute Fellow at Oxford University in 2023. Earlier in her career, she spent a decade as an editor and reporter at the Financial Times in New York, London, and Boston.