

Chapter 11

Ten Ways to Begin a Presentation

You will learn how to

- immediately gain the attention of your audience
- connect with the audience by adopting a less formal style

Why is this important?

How you introduce yourself and how the audience react to your introduction determine at least 30% of the success of your presentation. Audiences form their impressions of a presenter within approximately 90 seconds, after which it is difficult to change their opinion.

Many of the best presentations, or certainly the most enjoyable ones, are those where the presenter simply chats to the audience and tries to connect with them immediately. You can do this by using one or more of the following techniques:

1. say what you plan to do in your presentation and why
2. tell the audience some general facts about where you come from
3. give an interesting statistic that relates to your country
4. give an interesting statistic that relates directly to the audience
5. get the audience to imagine situations
6. ask the audience a question or get them to raise their hands
7. say something personal about yourself
8. mention something topical
9. say something counterintuitive
10. get the audience to do something

If you are an inexperienced presenter the easiest introduction is number 1, and 2–3 are also not difficult to manage. The introductions described in points 4–10 are advanced tips and require more confidence and creativity. They are worth trying because they deviate from what the average non-native speaker does and thus tend to attract audience attention.

Whichever beginning you chose, when you get up try to smile and keep your eyes on the audience—don't look up at the ceiling or down at the floor as this gives the impression that you can't remember what to say. Have a quick glance (look) at your notes, rather than looking behind you to remember what is on your slide. Audiences like positive enthusiastic presenters, so don't joke or say anything negative about the location of the congress, the organization, or about the local people, and the local infrastructure. This may amuse some members of the audience but alienate others—particularly those who live locally.

11.1 Say what you plan to do in your presentation and why

A good standard introduction while showing your title slide is to say some or all of the following:

- what hypotheses you wanted to test
- why you chose this particular method for testing them
- what you achieved
- what impact this might have on your field

ORIGINAL

Hello everyone and thank you for coming. First of all I'd like to introduce myself, my name is Ksenija Bartolić. As you can see, the title of my presentation is *Innovative Methods of Candidate Selection in Industry*. I work in a small research group at the University of Zagreb in Croatia. We are trying to investigate the best way to select candidates for a job and we hope our research will be useful not just in the field of psychology but also for human resources managers in general.

REVISED

Hello, I am here to talk about a new way to select candidates for a position in a company. I'd like to tell you three things. First, why I think the current methods for selecting candidates are not effective. Second, my radical alternative, which is to let the receptionist of the company make the decision. And third, how trials proved that even against my own expectations this solution reduced recruitment costs by 500%. Moreover, it was as effective as traditional interviews in more than 90% of cases. I believe that human resources managers . . .

Both versions are perfectly acceptable. Both are clear and reasonably succinct and you can obviously choose the one you feel most natural/confident with. The revised version has the following advantages:

- it avoids giving information that can be easily deduced from the title slide (i.e., the name of the presenter and the title of the presentation)
- it immediately tells the audience what they can expect to hear, without having to show an outline slide
- it covers the main messages of the presentation
- it includes the main result of the research at a point in the presentation where audience attention is likely to be high—the audience doesn't have to wait to the end of the presentation to hear what the outcome of the research was

However, the original version also has an advantage. By delaying important information (i.e., the overview of what the presenter is planning to say) it gives the audience a few moments to settle into their seats and tune in to your voice. Even if the audience are not listening or concentrating, and even if they have an initial problem with the presenter's accent or voice level, they will still be in a position to follow the rest of the presentation. So the revised version is good provided that the audience are already focused on you, which is generally the case if you are not the first presenter of a particular session.

The other nine beginnings outlined below are designed to immediately attract audience attention, but delaying key information by 30 seconds to a couple of minutes on the basis that the audience are not generally at their most alert during the first 60 to 90 seconds. The advantage of such introductions is that understanding the rest of the presentation does not hinge (depend) on the audience hearing and absorbing every word.

Note: The “original” versions are perfectly acceptable but are generally less effective in attracting audience attention than the “revised” versions.

11.2 Tell the audience some facts about where you come from

Audiences are often interested in learning new information about countries that they are not familiar with. For example, if you are at a conference in Europe or North America, and you are from a country outside these areas, then exploit your uniqueness and tell the audience something about your country. However this information should not last more than 30 seconds. Also, it must be clear to the audience that there is some connection with the topic of your research.

ORIGINAL

Good afternoon everyone, my name is Cristiane Rocha Andrade and I am a PhD student at the Federal University of Paraná in Brazil. I am here to give you a presentation on some research I have been conducting on allergies to cosmetics and to propose a way to use natural cosmetics.

REVISED

I come from Brazil. It took me 30 hours to travel the 9189 km to get here, so please pay attention! In Brazil we have two big forests, the Amazonian and the Atlantic with around 56,000 species of plants. More than 90% of these species have not been studied yet. This is why I decided to study natural cosmetics with raw materials from Brazil.

In the revised version, Cristiane cleverly gets the audience to pay attention, by explicitly telling them to do so (but in a humorous way). She uses many numbers, including the exact number of kilometers between her home town in Brazil and the location of the conference. She could have said “about 10,000 km” but that would not have had the same dramatic and humorous effective. She then connects where she comes from with the aim of her studies.

For another example using maps, see [Section 9.8](#)

11.3 Give an interesting statistic that relates to your country

Imagine that you are studying how soil erosion affects farmers and food production in your country. A typical but not very interesting way to start would be

Today I am going to present some results on the problem of soil erosion and how it affects food production in my country.

But you could begin much more dramatically with a statistic:

Ten thousand tons of soil are lost through erosion in my country every year. This means that fertility is lost and desertification ensues.

Or you could begin in a much more personal way:

Two months ago I went home and saw the devastation caused by the floods [shows picture of floods]. I have an uncle whose land has been almost completely eroded. This means that his crops will fail this year. So why is this a problem? It means that in the world today . . .

Another possible beginning of the same presentation could have been to say, *“In my country 30 tons of soil per hectare is lost due to rain every year.”*

But the problem is that 30 tons of soil are not something your audience can easily visualize. However, if you say, *“Imagine if this room was filled with soil. Well, after a single rainstorm on a small field in my country, three quarters of the soil would have disappeared.”* In this case you are giving the audience a statistic that they can relate to. It may not be completely accurate, but it is accurate enough for them to see that you are talking about a catastrophe. If you then say what the consequences would be if this process isn’t stopped, again using something the audience can relate to (*the equivalent of Iceland would disappear in less than a year*), then you will have a captivated audience.

For more on statistics, see [Sections 10.8](#) and [14.2](#)

11.4 Give an interesting statistic that relates directly to the audience

A very effective introduction is to show the title slide while the audience is coming in. Then when it is time to start, blank the screen and tell the audience a fundamental and recent statistic in your field or a key result in your research. After giving your statistic, you introduce yourself and say why the statistic relates to what you are going to tell the audience.

Of course, you know why you are mentioning a certain statistic and the relevance that it has, but the audience might not. Help them make the connection. If possible use statistics that they can relate to their personal experience or that they can easily understand or visualize.

Your statistics need to relate to your audience’s capacity to understand them. Which of these statistics do you find easier to understand/visualize or has the greatest impact on you?

1. 73 million papers have been completed in the last 10 years.
2. Last year 7,300,000 papers were completed.
3. Every day 20,000 scientific papers are completed.
4. 14 papers are completed every minute.
5. In the 10 minutes that I have been talking to you this morning 140 papers will have been completed around the world.

6. Hands up those of you who have finished writing a paper in the last seven days. Well around the world, in the last week about 140,000 papers will have been produced, that's an incredible 14 papers every minute.
7. By the year 2050 800 million papers will have been written, that's enough paper to fill this conference room 33,000 times.

Statistic 1 is probably too high for audiences to comprehend—if possible reduce statistics from millions, billions, and trillions to something more manageable. Statistics 2-4 are all fine, but they lack impact. Statistic 5 is more interesting because the timescale is now (the very moment that the presenter speaks), rather than a generic day or year. Statistic 6 directly involves the audience and motivates them to listen to the answer. Statistic 7 makes an unusual comparison to physical space.

11.5 Get the audience to imagine a situation

Without introducing yourself or the topic of your presentation, make your first word of your presentation “Suppose . . .” and then give the audience a hypothetical situation which relates both to the audience and to the topic of your research.

ORIGINAL	REVISED
My name is Minhaz-Ul Haque and the title of my presentation is Using Protein from Whey-coated Plastic Films to Replace Expensive Polymers. As you can see in this outline slide, I will first introduce the topic of . . .	Suppose everyone in this room had brought with them today all the food packaging that they had thrown away in the last year. I have counted about 60 people here. Given that the average person consumes 50 kilos of food packaging a year, then that is three tons of packaging. Over the next 4 days of this conference, we will produce about 450 kilos of packaging, including plastic bottles. My research is aimed at increasing the recyclability of this packaging by 75%. How will we do it? Using protein from whey-coated plastic films to replace expensive polymers. My name is Minhaz-Ul Haque and . . .

11.6 Ask the audience a question/Get the audience to raise their hands

An effective way to start a presentation is to get the audience to think about a question. If you use this technique, ask your questions, wait for a maximum of two seconds, and then continue.

For example, imagine you are at a conference on rare diseases. There is little point in beginning your presentation by showing your audience a slide with the following definition:

Rare Diseases are a heterogeneous group of serious and chronic disorders having a social burden.

Your audience will probably already know what a rare disease is. Instead you need to tell them something they don't know and something that will attract their interest. So, cut the text completely and write the following on the whiteboard (but have a slide as a backup in case there is no whiteboard):

1:50,000

1:2,000

The audience will be immediately curious to know what the numbers refer to. This is what you could say:

Do you know anyone who has a rare disease? *[Two second pause]* Well if you are from the United Kingdom, the chances are that you don't. But if you are from Spain, then you might know someone who does have a rare disease. Does that mean that here in Spain we have more rare diseases? No, it simply means that our definition of what constitutes a rare disease is different from that in the UK. A rare disease in the UK is something that affects 1 in 50,000 people. In Spain we follow the European Union definition of 1 in 2,000. That's a very big difference. Well, my research group has been looking at . . .

The technique is to immediately tell the audience something that they may not know, rather than giving them an abstract definition of something they already know. Notice that each sentence is short—this makes the sentences easy for you to say and easy for the audience to understand. The two-second pause after asking the question may seem like a long time to you (when you are on the podium) but for the audience it is a chance to think about the question you have just asked, and to them it doesn't seem long at all.

An alternative to asking a question is to get the audience to raise their hands in response. As with the question technique, give the instruction (hands up if/raise your hands if), then wait for a maximum of two seconds before you continue.

ORIGINAL

Hello everyone, I am Rossella Mattera, a PhD student in Molecular Medicine. I am here today to tell you about the ExPEC project, in particular about a vaccine against ExPEC. What is ExPEC? ExPEC or extra-intestinal pathogenic *Escherichia coli*, is a microorganism that causes a large spectrum of diseases associated with a high risk of death. The commonest extra-intestinal *E. coli* infection that is caused by these strains is cystitis, in fact 80% of women have this "experience" during their lifetime, with a reinfection in less than 6 months. . .

REVISED

Hands up the men who have had cystitis. *[Pause]* I bet many of the men here don't even know what cystitis is *[said in jokey tone]*. In this room there are 20 women and 16 of you women will experience cystitis during your lifetime. You men are lucky because cystitis mainly affects women. It is a horrible infection that makes you feel you want to go to the toilet every two or three minutes. Cystitis is caused by ExPEC or extra-intestinal pathogenic *Escherichia coli*. This infection affects 80% of women. Cystitis, pyelonephritis, sepsis, and neonatal meningitis are common infections caused by these strains. Most ExPECs are resistant to the antibiotic therapy, therefore we need a vaccine. I am a PhD student in Molecular Medicine. I am here today to tell you about a vaccine against ExPECs.

11.7 Say something personal about yourself

Tell an anecdote about yourself—how you first became interested in the topic, what you particularly like about this area of research, where you work, and what is special about it, a particular event that took place during the research, for example an unexpected problem, a counterintuitive result. Show the audience your enthusiasm for the topic—tell them what amazes and excites you about your research. When you talk about your passion for your work your face will automatically light up and your voice will be animated—the audience will thus be more engaged.

ORIGINAL

I am going to describe the creation of strawberries with a strong consistency in the pulp. In our research we modified strawberry plants with agrobacterium and we obtained 41 independent transgenic plants. On the basis of yield and fruits firmness, we then selected six different varieties of strawberry.

REVISED

I became interested in agronomy and biosciences completely by accident. One summer holiday while I was a student I was working in an organic ice cream shop. Every day we got crates of fresh fruit, and every day we had to throw away kilos of strawberries because the ones at the bottom were completely squashed and had already started to mold. The pears, on the other hand, were always fine. So I thought, what if we could mix the succulent look and delicious taste of a strawberry with the strong consistency of the pulp in a pear?

In the original version, the presenter launches into her topic without giving the audience time to switch their brains on. If the audience miss what she says now, their understanding of what she says later may be impeded. In the second version, she answers a question that many people have—how did someone choose to do the job they do? The audience enjoy comparing their experiences with that of the presenters.

Here is a true story told by Professor Maria Skyllas-Kazacos from the University of New South Wales, of how she became a chemical engineer.

One of the choices in the industrial chemistry degree, I think when you got to the third year, was whether to do the mainstream industrial chemistry subjects or to do polymer science. A friend a year above me said, “Oh, you should do the polymers. Polymers is a really big, important industry.” So I decided to try polymers. I went along to the first class—only five or six of us had chosen this, and I was the one girl—in a polymer engineering laboratory. The lecturer started to talk about grinding and milling and adding carbon black to rubbers, and he said, “When you come in the lab, you’ve got to wear dirty clothes because we use a lot of carbon black in here and you’re going to get covered in it. And tie your hair all the way back and make sure it’s all covered, because any loose hair can get jammed in the machine and you’ll be scalped.” I had very long hair! A friend told me later that this lecturer did not want girls in the lab and deliberately went out of his way to scare me off doing polymer engineering—and he succeeded—I dropped polymer engineering immediately and took up the industrial chemistry option instead.

Note how she

- uses colloquial language and sounds like she is talking to a friend
- gives interesting details
- quotes from other people (i.e., uses their words)
- mixes long sentences with short ones
- obviously enjoys telling this story

11.8 Mention something topical

Try to relate your beginning to something that is already in the audience's mind, a recent news story or something connected to the conference.

ORIGINAL	REVISED
My name is Horazio Perez and I work at the Center for Transportation Research in . . . In my presentation today I would like to tell you the results of an experimental study on real time bus arrival time prediction using GPS data.	I know that a lot of you, like me, have been getting to the conference each day by bus. I don't know about you, but I have had to wait about 10 to 15 minutes each time. And it's been great fun. In fact, not only have the buses been late, but as soon as one comes, then another two quickly follow. And that's made me even happier. Why? Because my research is investigating why this happens—why do buses come in threes? And if it happens here in Geneva, where Rolex have their headquarters, then clearly no one else has solved the problem yet, and I am going to get in there first. My name is Horazio Perez and . . .

Horazio takes a very banal situation, catching a bus, and relates it both to the audience's experience and the topic of his research. He also adds an element of suspense by talking about "fun" and "happy" in a situation which for most people would simply be frustrating. By doing this he attracts and holds the audience's attention.

11.9 Say something counterintuitive

People like to have their views challenged, as long as these views are not related to things they feel very strongly about such as religion, ethics, and politics. If your research has proved something that goes against commonly held opinion, then this is a perfect opportunity to gain the audience's attention.

ORIGINAL

In this presentation a comparative analysis will be made of some investigations into the proficiency in the use of the English language on a world scale. The parameters and methodology used to make the analysis, along with some of the results will be presented. I will begin by giving a brief overview of the background . . .

REVISED

Who speaks and writes the best English in the world? The British maybe, *[Pause]* after all they have the Queen, and that's where the language originated? *[Pause]* Or do you think it's the Americans? Or the Canadians or Australians? *[Pause]* Actually it's the Scandinavians, the Danes, and the Dutch. And if you have been attending most of the presentations here in the last few days, I guess it's these guys who you understood the best. Does this mean that the native English speakers can't even speak their own language? Of course not. But . . .

11.10 Get the audience to do something

Author Bjørn Lomborg, an expert on global problems and one of the world's top 75 most influential people (*Esquire* magazine), began a presentation for TED.com by saying

What are the big problems in the world? And I must say, before I go on, I should ask every one of you to try and get out pen and paper because I'm actually going to ask you to help me to look at how we do that. So get out your pen and paper. The bottom line is, there is a lot of problems out there in the world. I'm just going to list some of them. There are 800 million people starving. There's a billion people without clean drinking water. Two billion people without sanitation. There are several million people dying of HIV and AIDS. The lists go on and on. There's two billions of people who will be severely affected by climate change—so on. There are many, many problems out there.

In an ideal world, we would solve them all, but we don't. We don't actually solve all problems. And if we do not, the question I think we need to ask ourselves—and that's why it's on the economy session—is to say, if we don't do all things, we really have to start asking ourselves, which ones should we solve first? And that's the question I'd like to ask you. If we had say, 50 billion dollars over the next four years to spend to do good in this world, where should we spend it?

He then got the audience to work together for 30 seconds to think about 10 of the biggest challenges in the world and to prioritize solutions to these problems. His technique was not just to present statistics but also to gain the audience's attention and involve them directly. This meant that they really felt involved and were thus more motivated to hear his solutions.

Getting the audience to do something active, rather than just sitting there passively, has several advantages:

- it gives you time to settle your nerves
- it gives the audience a nice break from the usual run of back-to-back presentations

- it normally generates a lot of interest, particularly if you have a terrible time slot for your presentation, such as at the end of a session

I have mentioned a lot of techniques for opening a presentation. Your instinctive reactions while reading them were probably as follows:

1. yes, most are better than traditional beginnings
2. but no, I could never have the confidence to do that

There is absolutely no reason why you can't use such techniques. I have had students who had never given a presentation before, and who are even quite timid, who managed to create beginnings like the ones outlined above. It does require a little courage. But only a little. Yet the result is fantastic. The audience appreciate it and when you see their positive reaction it makes you feel good and boosts your confidence. The result is that you deliver a better presentation.

The secret is to experiment. Try adapting your topic to one or more of the ways outlined above. Be creative. Have fun. And keep trying until you find the best approach. But before using it at the conference, test it out on colleagues to make sure that it gets the reaction you hoped for.

The more fun you have preparing your presentation, the more fun you will have when you give the presentation, and the more fun the audience will have listening to you.

It is fundamental to connect with the audience. If you don't connect with them, they will not give you the attention you deserve. This is particularly true if your presentation is scheduled just before lunch, after lunch, or at the end of the day, i.e., at times of the day when the audience's attention is very low.

Finally, it is not only at the beginning of your presentation that you can use these techniques. They are also excellent ways of regaining attention later in the presentation.