

Principles of how to explain an idea

1. The idea and how it works are separate; keep it that way

“And then this happens, and you click this and a bird appears on your screen... an otter taps at your window. Yes, a real otter... on your window at home. We'll breed them for it.” Yes, you've lost them - the audience, not the otters - by now if you started here. Keep apart the idea, how you'll make the idea, and how people will interact with the idea.

2. Labels stick; use them

Instead of labeling your idea “Idea 1” or “Direction 1”, give it a creative title. This suggestion might meet with resistance but guess what happens if you don't label your idea? Your client does. And then the brilliant idea becomes known as the “gorilla idea” Earth Hour - that's a good name.

3. Use a logline

In 25 words or less, how would you explain the non-executional bits of your idea? Hollywood uses loglines. Earth Hour - “We're going to get the world to turn off their lights for an hour.” The best way to get good at this is to pick things you're familiar with and explain them in a sentence. Try movies or apps, try to explain a singer, or a company you love.

4. Show, pause, repeat your way through

Do not over-speak. Do not rush. Speak less than you think you need to. Take. Your. Time. Repeat a keyword through the presentation. They say 7 times makes it stick. Show your idea. Show people implying, anticipating, or explaining the idea. Get out of the way of your idea. It's not about you. You think it is. It never is.

5. Let other people finish your sentences

A pause allows people to grasp the idea and process it through their own mental frameworks. You know you're onto something when someone you're presenting to says... “And then you could...” That's what you want. Let them keep talking. Pauses make it happen. Counselors do it all the time...

6. Set it up

If you want your idea to happen, think about when, where, and for how long you do it. Smells? Sounds? Senses? Start dark? Start bright? In a home? In a shop?

7. Don't let someone change your presentation moments before you present

Unless it's bad or wrong. This will throw you. If you did this to me when I was young, guess what? I still remember.

8. Care and be confident

Both are contagious. Avoid condescension and too much ego. Increasingly, we need to educate people on how to buy our ideas and to help them feel safe while doing so. Some bravado is sexy but keep your feet on the ground.

9. Signposts help you get there and get remembered

When you present, remember that your audience has not lived with your thinking. Signposts help you focus and they help the audience process your words. They provide direction and respite.

You can tell the audience:

- What you're going to tell them,
- How you're going to tell them, and then
- Tell them what you told them.

Like this: "Today I'm going to show you how we can get 15-year olds to love retirement homes. We need to A, B and C. And here's how..." And then at the end, repeat these words but using the past tense.

You can use signposts to end a section of the presentation. "Here's what I said I was going to tell you, here's why it's important, here's what to do about it."

You can also use article-writing techniques in a presentation. You can use numbers: "3 things you need to know about X." Numbers tell the brain, "You need to focus on these points now." They also give importance to the information because they imply you've sifted through a lot of thinking to get there. You can use lists - if you dislike lists, relax: everything is list-able. You can use snappy Internet headlines. Whatever works.

10. Make it stick

Play with counter-intuitive headlines as well as "How to" and "Why" setups. Counter-intuitive headlines make people curious. They open a hole through which your ideas can burst. The "How to" and "Why" approaches cut to the chase by saying, "I have the answers for you; you're in safe hands."

The format of your presentation is also something that deserves thoughts. Think about your audience, what they will be comfortable with, and how far you can push them. Powerpoint is one default format but it doesn't have to be. A combination of screen and analog entices people to shift their attention and it stimulates their senses (see, hear, touch).

If you use Powerpoint or Keynote, keep in mind that it's not supposed to be a Word document with images. You are the presentation. Everything else supports you.

11. Rehearse

Rehearse your spiel. Write it, sharpen it, present it to yourself as you're walking to work. It needs to feel automatic so that when you're confronted with the anxiety of sharing it with a room of people, it flows.

12. Apply the Blink test

I can't recall a client buying an over-explained idea. People either get it and want it or or they aren't and they don't. Within seconds. Make a fast impact.

13. Plan it analog

Don't start planning a presentation in front of a computer. It's a trap. Focus on your story dynamics, not your fade-ins and fade-outs. Grab a pencil and some paper and think about how to explain it before you design it.

i. Map your audience and what you know about them. ii. Write the one thing you want them to understand. iii. Write what you're asking them to do. iv. Then outline. Write the 1, 3, or 5 key points that are essential to your argument. Then write 1-3 supporting points for those arguments. v. Cull. Draw a line through anything that's not compelling. vi. Decide which points need drama. vii. If you're nervous, write it longhand. viii. If you write it longhand and after you've practiced a bit, take it back to the handful of points you want to make. ix. Try not to take notes or cards into the presentation. Cards will distract you and make you worry about what you've missed. People won't know you've missed something unless you're incoherent or reaching for cards. x. Decide whether your presentation starts when you're in front of the audience or before. And then what happens after you present.