**Presentation Tips**

**Cornell Cup USA – Arm Enabled**

**Prof. David R. Schneider, Cornell Director of MEng Studies in Systems Engineering, drs44@cornell.edu**

Most students within technical design fields such as engineering, architecture, and the physical & life sciences do not have the chance to take a presentation course during their academic years. Yet most of these students have to give presentations as a key part of their project’s, and their own personal, performance evaluations. Furthermore, traditional presentation classes may not focus on Project Proposal Presentations and Progress Reviews Presentations, which are the most common types of presentations these students may have to give in the professional careers.

This document is created to provide some key tips & tricks to use in such presentations and address many of the common mistakes made by presenters. It can be read straight through but it is also meant to be something that you can refer to sections of as you refine your presentation or practice its delivery.

**Knowing Your Audience**

In most cases, presentations are developed for the purpose of conveying information. In many cases this also includes helping your audience understand your approaches so that they will come to the same conclusions that you have. Additionally, presentations can also be useful for gaining much needed feedback and/or buy-in from your audience.

Although these are important purposes of presentations, an important realization to make is that a presentation is not being made for you. It is being made for your audience. To understand your audience here are some important questions to ask yourself BEFORE and AFTER creating your presentation.

Who are the people that need to learn?

What does your audience already know or don’t know? (What if you guess wrong?)

Who are the people that have the power to change the situation the presentation is addressing?

What is their need?

How can you meet their need?

How can you meet their need better, cheaper, faster?

What makes your opinion important?

Why would they not want to listen to your idea?

If you don’t know the answer to these, it’s probably best you find them as soon as you can. For example, knowing if your audience is pre-disposed to being in favor or against your presentation’s topics/conclusions should greatly influence how much supporting evidence you should prepare or misconceptions you should try to clear up.

**Presentation Outline**

It is your responsibility to do everything you can, within the time allowed, to make sure that your message is delivered and perceived the way you want it to be. One of the most classic ways to structure your presentation to make sure you achieve your goals, or at least make sure your audience knows what they should have gotten out of a presentation, is to use the “**Tell x 3**” or “**Tell3**” methods. (pronounced “Tell Times Three” or “Tell Cubed”)

The “Tell x 3” method says that you will tell your audience the information you want them to remember 3 times.

1st: At the beginning of the presentation, as part of your intro, you tell the audience what you

are going to tell them about in the presentation ***conveying the presentation’s value and***

***scope***.

2nd: Then in the main part of the presentation you actually tell them all of the information you

want to convey

3rd: At the end of the presentation in your wrap up/conclusion, tell them what it is you just told

them, ***repeating to the audience the main take aways*** that you want them to have

This re-iteration is important. From the 1st “tell”, the audience will know what to listen for in your main presentation (i.e the 2nd “tell”). Then when the audience hears the 3rd “tell” at the end, they will either feel a sense of reassurance of “yes, I did hear that” or will hopefully recognize that they missed something that they should have heard which will cause them to ask a question. Triggering these questions also helps ensure you meet your main goal: that the audience perceives your information the way you want them to.

(Even in this section’s description we just used the Tell x 3 method. We told you the main goal “that the audience perceives your information the way you want them to”, then we told you the method, then our last sentence re-iterated it again how it all works together to meet what was our original end goal.)

Actually presenting a slide with an outline of your presentation is perhaps only worthwhile if your presentation is long enough to warrant it. As a general rule, presentations 20 minutes or longer can use an outline slide. With smaller presentations, the time that would be spent on the outline slide could typically be used more effectively.

**Your Opening & Setting Up Your Narrative (a.k.a. Tell #1)**

The “Tell x 3” method also makes good use of the “**Golden Minute**”concept. This concept states that any audience will give you approximately 1 minute of their time to decide whether you are worth listening to or not. So in that minute you must ***convey the presentation’s value and scope***.

Sometimes this is considered as introducing your **thesis statement**. So it’s not surprising that good thesis statements have the 4 following properties:

1. Tell the audience the specific topic of your presentation.
   * What is the value of seeing your presentation?
   * How will this meet the audience’s need?
2. Impose manageable limits on that topic.
   * What is the scope of the presentation?
   * What is the focus or the main example topic/case study/ etc. ?

1. Suggests the organization of your presentation
   * What is the order in which you will present your ideas?
   * What are the main sections to your presentation & what is the key idea in each section?
2. Is memorable and concise
   * Don't get too specific. Leave the details for later.

**Helping you to well define/formalize your *value* so you can clearly state it to your audience:**

Value can take a lot of forms and a just few examples can be: What results you intend to present?, What hypothesis do you intend to prove?, or What is that they are going to learn or be able to do as a result of the presentation? In order to convey that value though you should also ask yourself the following questions and see if your presentation helps your audience understand why what you’re presenting on is important.

* + What benefits were/would be realized?
  + What problems were/would be eliminated?
  + What questions were/would be answered?
  + What obstacles were/must be overcome?
  + How were/would other people be affected?
  + How will this meet the audience’s need?

The last question is the most important as it is why you are giving the presentation in the first place. Not every presentation will address all of these questions equally or even at all. However, these are just some of the key topics you may want to advertise during your Golden Minute.

**Scope Definition as a tool to Curtail Misconceptions Early On**

The scope of the presentation is the depth and the narrative you intend to tell, i.e. what is the outline/progression you intend to follow in helping them to understand your conclusions, and to what level of detail should the audience expect throughout. Sometimes letting the audience know that a topic is outside the scope of your presentation is just as important as to letting them know what is in scope.

If people start asking questions that seem out of place, it may be because what they think they’re supposed to get out of this presentation is not the same thing that you have planned. In these cases, it can be helpful to remind them of the presentation’s purpose and scope.

**First Impressions**

Your audience is also “sizing” you up during that Golden Minute. Natural charisma, well-spoken professional confidence (not arrogance), and even an appropriate sense of humor can all help your audience’s opinion of you. All of these attributes and more may make up your “presentation style”, however, regardless of these “bonuses”, the audience’s founding opinion of your presentation’s quality will really stem from how well they can understand your introduction/thesis statement.

As is the case with many things in life, “success builds success” and if your audience sees that they can understand your opening and see the value in it, they will be more willing to listen attentively and try to understand the rest of what you have to say.

Additionally most audiences are more receptive to positive emotions than negative emotions, so just remember, even if you’re nervous just try to smile. If you smile, your audience is likely to perceive your nervousness as enthusiasm or excitement for your presentation.

**Giving Credit to Contributors**

It is important to give credit to those who were involved in the work discussed in your presentation. A common place to do this is in the beginning, largely for 3 reasons:

1. First and foremost it is the right thing to do and is considered proper etiquette.
2. If credit isn’t given, the people who could be potentially be your greatest supporters will be wondering whether you are going to give them any credit at all, rather than actually paying attention to your presentation
3. Everyone is usually calm at the beginning and people are happy to be mentioned at the beginning of the presentation, which may or may not be true at the end of it.

Unlike blaim which can be diffused amongst a group, praise does not lose its potency when shared. Credit can also be given at the end of a presentation but should not be skipped if you are running low on time.

**Slide Formatting 101**

Here is a list of basic rules for formatting your slides.

1. **Minimize the Amount of Text**
2. **Good Contrast**:

Text color(s) can be easily read against the background color(s)

1. **Minimize the amount of text**
2. **Large Text:**

Easily readable at the back of the room, or if the presentation is going on-line what will it look like in the computer window at the recorded resolution?

1. **Minimize the amount of text**
2. **Well defined titles:**

Titles of slides are clearly and consistently identified by being larger, potentially in a different color, or formatting or perhaps having a fill color/image behind the title text. Titles are also relevant to the main takeaway for the slide.

1. **Minimize the amount of text**
2. **Maintain Common Formatting**

Varying your slides layout can help with keeping the audience’s attention but changing text sizes, fonts, colors, slide backgrounds, bullet point styles, etc. can cause your audience to pay attention to the formatting changes rather than the content. Furthermore, common formatting can help the audience know how to quickly interpret later slides in the presentation.

1. **Minimize the amount of text**
2. **Non-distracting backgrounds:**

It may look cool to you but is it so cool & attention grabbing that it takes away the attention from your main points or even from you?

1. **Minimize the amount of text**
2. **Images are Relevant & Properly Credited**

Images are great tools to help explain key ideas but they should have a purpose in your presentation other than looking “cool” because then they are a distraction. Make sure that proper credit is given for any images you did not create (aside from clip art that does not require it), i.e. diagrams taken from other sources are given a reference either at the bottom of the slide (most common form) or at least at the end of the presentation.

And just in case you didn’t hear it before: Minimize the amount of text to keep the audience’s attention on you and not just reading your slides. With every rule, there are always potential exceptions but it’s better to be very familiar with the rules and their purpose before you try to bend them. A couple examples of when/how to break even the “Minimize the Amount of Text” rule are given in the Slide Creation & Controlling (not just keeping) the Audience’s Attention Section.

**Slide Creation & Controlling (not just keeping) the Audience’s Attention**

The slides you create can be potentially an asset or a significant hindrance to communicating your message. It is your responsibility as the presenter to direct the audience’s attention back and forth between you and your slides, as well as where on the slides they should be looking at a given time. Therefore it is important to create your slides in a manner that will help you to control their attention and the order in which information is presented.

This is more than determining the order of your slides but rather how you present each slide itself. Below are a few common ways you can lose at least part of your audience’s attention as well as potential solutions to each of these pitfalls.

**Lists & “Slides with Lots of Stuff” in general**

Presenting a long bulleted list may seem like an efficient way of getting a lot of information on the screen at once. However, displaying an entire list all at once can be very inefficient in communicating these points. For example, several lists have been offered in this document so far. Can you remember every item in every list? The odds are no. Most likely you remember the broader topic and that there was a list.

Since this is a written document you can always go back and review them when you need, and the argument can be made that if you make your slides available afterwards that your audience can do the same. So is it important that your audience remember every item on the list?

Perhaps not but here’s the other problem with lists and in general with any slide that has a lot of “stuff” on them: You are almost guaranteed that when you have a long list of items, there is a significant percentage of your audience that is reading or looking at some other part of the what’s up on the slide instead of listening to you. Your argument is not being heard. Instead the audience is making their own conclusions based on what they’re reading and the few words they pick out of what you’re saying. (Pros & Cons lists can be particularly susceptible to this)

*Possible Solution:*

*An easy solution to this issue is to simply reveal only one bullet point of the list at a time as you discuss each new bullet point. This way your audience knows what to look at, can do so quickly, and then return their attention back to you as the presenter. This has the added benefit that your slides are changing fairly often which gives your audience a small but noticeable snap-to-attention every time something new pops up on the screen.*

*A variation on this idea is to also grey out the bullets or other “stuff” that you are not talking about at that point and/or perhaps bold or highlight the “stuff” that is being discussed.*

Even if your objective is just to get the broader topic of the list across this method will help your audience follow your arguments. Furthermore, in many of your careers, the number of people who will take the time to review your slides afterwards is commonly significantly smaller than your initial audience in the room, so this may be your only chance to get your ideas across.

**Pictures**

Pictures in general are great to add to presentations because they’re “something shiny” and help maintain the audience’s attention. However because they’re shiny they also can be a distraction to what you’re saying. Instead of listening to you, your audience is thinking: “What is that a picture of?”, “Why is that picture up there?”, or “That’s interesting, I wonder…”

*Possible Solution:*

*First off, make sure that you only include images that are truly relevant to your message. Assuming this is true, whenever anything new appears on the screen it is important to address it as soon as possible. If there is an elephant on roller skates, address the fact, stating perhaps why that elephant is there as soon as it appears. Now that it’s been addressed, it’s old news, and your audience can once again pay attention to you.*

*Again, remember to give proper credit (written within the presentation) to the source of the picture if it is not your own.*

**Graphs , Tables, Charts & other Figures**

Visual representation of ideas and data can be very effective ways to communicate information and in many cases a lot of information in a small amount of space. However, like pictures they can be “something shiny”, and like lists they can distract your audience’s attention as they attempt to discern the details of the figure and draw their own conclusions before you have the chance to describe your own.

*Possible Solution:*

*As with anything you put on your slides, you have to think about “What is it that you want them to realize upon seeing this” or said another way “If they saw this figure again 1 week from now, what are the key ideas that I want to jump to the front of their mind?”. This attention to what is the main take away is especially important with figures.*

*To help your audience connect your message with the figure, it can be very helpful to quickly highlight the key aspects of the figure. This can be done by drawing circles around or arrows to key data points, bolding text, or literally highlighting text or pieces of the figure. A couple of examples are shown in the separate “CornellCupUSA\_presentedBy\_Intel\_SampleGraphSlides” document.*

*Please note that not every graph or table needs to be discussed in as much detail as is provided in the sample presentation slides. It is assumed for this sample that the provided graph and table are discussing topics that are deemed important enough to the audience to go into this detail.*

*Like pictures, once you have addressed the figure for the audience, they can then proceed to listening to the rest of what you have to say without the figure being as large of a potential distraction. Many times it is good to leave the figure slide as soon as it has been fully addressed, even if this means going to a more blank “transition slide”.*

When presenting data, make sure you show complete data. This helps the audience have confidence in you as it shows you’re not trying to hide anything. This doesn’t mean that you need to show all of the one million data points that you have, but if you’re showing a summary graph or chart be sure to show the full range of the summary and mention significant outliers or data variability. Complete data can also turn out to be very useful in answering questions.

It’s is also rare for all of your sets of data to undeniably support all of your conclusions. Don’t be afraid to mention some of the downsides. Not only is this honest and important part of being a good engineer or scientist but it again can inspire confidence in you that the good results are also not an embellishment. It can also help you deal with potential “nay-sayers” points by addressing them directly in your own pre-pared rehearsed argument before they attack you with them afterwards. Sometimes if you openly raise concerns or problems, your audience can be more receptive or want to be a part of generating a solution rather than trying to shoot holes into your current solution.

*Always make sure to label your graph’s axes and CHECK YOUR UNITS. Again, remember to give proper credit (written within the presentation) to the source of the graph, figure, etc. if it is not your own.*

**Equations**

It is a common misbelief that showing equations will make you look smart, but far more often they are used improperly and can actually alienate your audience. Although equations are a quick and succinct way to present a variety of important relationships between contributing factors, they are often only quick to read and be understood by you. For your audience, this may very likely be the first time that they are seeing the equation, or even understanding the meaning of the terms.

Unlike many presentations given in the academic environment where the professor already is intimately familiar with the material, most audiences, even at professional conferences, may be not be even close to as familiar with the terms & equations as you would like them to be. Additionally, the terms or variable representations that you may feel are common may not be common for people from other parts of the world, country, or even people who read different text books on the same subject.

*Possible Solution:*

*Use equations sparingly. When doing so treat them in a similar way that you treat complex graphs and figures; highlight the key aspects quickly so the audience will pay attention to you. This can be done by revealing only part of an equation or at first, highlighting or circling the key terms, or graying out the less important terms. You may also want to start out by defining a few of the most important terms before revealing any part of the equation.*

Remember, in many cases your presentation may also be accompanied by some kind of report. So the exact equations may be better left for the report instead of trying to explain all of the details in the presentation. Equations should be used in the same way as any other visual device; only if it helps the audience better understand the ideas you have decided are important enough to communicate in the presentation.

**Complete Sentences**

Complete sentences can be tempting, particularly if you have come up with a clever wording that you want to make sure you remember. However, not only do they take up a lot of space on your slide, but your audience may become quickly bored being read to. This can lead them to try to read your slides before you do and then “zone out”, perhaps starting to play with their phones, answering emails, or simply cause them to make the decision to leave as they can simply read your slides later when it’s more convenient for them.

*Possible Solution:*

*Don’t write complete sentences. Exact wording is often not as necessary as you might think. People will not always remember exactly what you say or even do, but they will remember what you made them “feel”. So what are the few key words that you can put on the slide, such that 1 week after the presentation, if your audience members saw that slide again, those words/images/etc. would help trigger the key ideas that you want them to remember. Those same words/images/etc. can be used by you as a trigger to help you remember during your presentation what ideas you want to convey.*

With every rule there are exceptions. Quotes are a good example of where complete sentences, exact wording, and/or large amounts of text are acceptable or even necessary. Good examples might be a quote from a previous speech, citing a rule or regulation, a formal definition, or a specific declaration like a mission statement.

**Slide Progression & Transitions**

The key to a good presentation delivery is making sure that you have an easy to follow progression through your slides. A good progression will not only help the audience come to the same conclusions you have but also feel comfortable in their understanding of the supporting arguments. To aid you in developing a good progression follow these steps in developing your slides:

1. **Think about where the audience’s thought process is at the beginning of the slide.**
   1. What do they know at this point?
   2. What don’t they know at this point?
   3. What was the last thing I told them and how does that relate to the ideas on this slide?
2. **Think about the new information you want to add to their understanding on this slide**.
   1. Some experts advise to try to keep your slides to one main idea each.
   2. What are the critical details that need to be hit?
   3. What do I need to tell them now so they can understand the next slide?
3. **Think about the final statement you want to leave the audience with on that slide and how it can set up the next slide or part of your presentation**.
   1. What is the one takeaway I want the audience to have from this slide, or the one thing I want them to remember should they see this slide again?
   2. How can I make the next slide(s) seem like a logical progression?

Rather than trying to remember exact words in your presentation, sticking with remembering these 3 concepts can help your presentation feel more natural, logical, and even well rehearsed.

Additionally, when your presentation has multiple sections, the “Tell x 3” method can also be employed for each section, offering smaller 1st tell intros and 3rd tell conclusions to bookend each section. However your audience will give you decreasing smaller “golden minute” periods with each section, i.e. the time your audience will evaluate the value of each section gets progressively smaller than a minute with each following section’s intro.

**The Closing & Takeaways**

When concluding, make sure that you do not simply end. It is important to leave some small amount of time at the end of your presentation for your “3rd tell”, summarizing all of the key takeaways your audience should have. Typically the closing consists of approximately 1-2 lines each about the current state of the project and achievements, reiterating the largest concerns (both those dealt with and still outstanding), and perhaps including a couple key facts or performance metric results. Then you can say perhaps a few more lines summarizing your next steps and why they’re important. Finally, you thank the audience and anyone else you think deserves a quick extra shout-out if time allows and then open the floor for questions.

This 3rd tell’s importance is mentioned in the Presentation Outline section. In choosing your closing comments here are a few other important aspects to take into account:

* **Think heavily about all the reasons why your audience may be attending the presentation in the first place.** 
  + How can you tie together the main ideas from your presentation to show that it has met their needs?
* **Think about if someone who didn’t attend the presentation was to ask one of your audience members what your presentation was about.**
  + What are the one or two statements you would like that audience member to say in response?
  + What can you say in your presentation to help ensure that is what that audience member will say?

Also do not underestimate the value of a positive attitude. Ending with a ***realistically*** positive statement can have a strong impact on your audience. Even if your presentation suggests negative results you yourself can be show a positive professionalism that you have at least been diligent in reporting your findings accurately.

**The Importance of Time**

As the presenter, you are responsible for communicating all of your information in the time allowed. This is a responsibility to take seriously as it is not uncommon in industry that if a presentation runs long that you will be cut off or have your audience simply leave. In many corporate cultures, leaving at the end of the allocated time regardless of whether the presentation is done or not is not considered rude at all. This can be particularly dangerous for you as a presenter because in either case your audience will end up making decisions only on what you were able to present to them, complete or not.

One technique to help with this is to develop both long and short ways of presenting some of your material. This can be done using the same set of slides for both cases, but you have planned ahead of time what to shorten in your description if need be. This way you are able to put some forethought into what can be cut rather than having to make quick decision during your presentation, only to realize later that you left something important out.

When using this long & short version technique, it is useful to include a few key time points within your presentation. For example, if you know you should be at a certain point at 10 minutes but already 12 minutes have passed, that can serve as a signal for you to switch to your shorter version.

It is very rare that any presentation can include all of the details on a subject, so an important time conscious decision in creating a presentation is deciding what to leave in and what to leave out. Ask yourself “Do they really need to know everything?”. The answer is typically no and so double checking yourself as to what your specific audience needs to know can be helpful in trimming your presentation.

In cases where you are uncertain about what details to trim or you are concerned that if you do trim something questions may arise, it can be worthwhile to develop appendix (aka backup) slides to cover this material instead. This way should you discover during your presentation that this appendix information is something the audience needs more than you had originally thought, you are still prepared.

In some cases, smaller separate presentations can be prepared to answer specific questions you may anticipate but would rather not make a part of your main presentation if you don’t have to.

These extra presentations are usually only done for particularly important presentations and many times if the audience sees you have a separate presentation to answer a question, they will defer the answering to the end of the presentation, hence allowing you to give the original presentation that you desired in the first place.

Finally the most important technique to use is PRACTICE. Rehearsing your presentation is invaluable for many reasons and the easiest mistakes to catch in rehearsing is often going over time. Below is a general guideline for the amount of time to spend on a Tell x 3, 10 minute presentation:

* + 1st Tell: Tell you what I’m going to tell you (30-45 sec)
  + 2nd Tell: Actually tell you it (~6 min)
  + 3rd Tell: Tell you what I just told you (1-1.5 min)

That doesn’t add up to 10 minutes. Why? Because you need to leave room for questions. Remember your main objective is to make sure your audience understands the information you’re communicating so questions can be helpful and be your final effort to make sure you have met your objective.

Two other important skills to develop that can greatly help with your presentation time management are how to handle questions, and how to review your presentation, which are both dealt with in the following sections.

**Question Handling**

Handling questions is an important part of being a presenter and in many cases regardless of how well received your planned part of the presentation was; many audience members may judge you, the quality of your presentation, and your work based upon how well you dealt with questions. The key words not to miss in that last sentence are “dealt with” which does not necessarily mean “directly answer”.

It is important to always remember you are in control of your presentation. You, as the presenter, are automatically given some authority and as such are responsible for what occurs during the time of your presentation, which does include handling questions.

Even if you ask for questions to be held to the end, it doesn’t mean that your audience will hold to those rules, particularly if you are presenting to senior personnel who have tight schedules and want to make sure they are getting out of the presentation what they need. (or if they’re simply people who like to hear themselves talk, or are strongly opposed to your ideas, or are just arrogant know-it-all jerks, etc.) Below are some tried & true tips for handling questions, particularly should they be raised during the middle of your presentation:

**Situation #1:** A small and direct question is raised that would take a short answer to address.

**Solution:** If you get a question but you are able to confidently answer the question quickly and succinctly, go for it. It’s probably better that you do as it may help them better understand the rest of the presentation and your audience will give you a few “bonus points” for being able to think on your feet. If you can’t answer the question quickly try one of the solutions to the situations below.

**Situation #2:** A question is raised regarding material you planned on covering later on in your presentation.

**Common Mistake:** You jump to that part of the presentation in an attempt to answer the question quickly, or in an effort to be as accommodating and respectful of your audience as possible.

**Mistake’s Common Result:** If you start jumping to different slides, you have the lost control of your presentation. You are no longer giving the presentation you wanted with your well developed argument progression. You are now letting someone else dictate the order. This can easily lead to misconceptions as your audience is now seeing this information without the supporting information you wanted to give. This in turn can lead to more questions and conjectures that may even spiral out of you control but at the very least eats away at your precious time and breaks the flow of your presentation.

**Solution #1:** Use a powerful 2 phase technique referred to as “Acknowledgement & Deflection”. The first phase, Acknowledgement, is all about showing respect for the question asker and their question. At times this can be tough, but regardless of how ridiculous their question is, it is important to do something that says to them “I am recognizing you have a question. You are being heard.”

This can come in many forms such as, “Thank you for asking your question” or “I’m glad you raised that point” or if you’re fighting the urge to say “You have to be kidding me” at least say something such as “That’s an interesting statement”. The point is, at least from the audience member’s perspective, that they have an important enough concern to cause them to act and raise a question. You as the presenter in return must “acknowledge” that you are listening. This sends a signal to both the question asker and the rest of the audience that you will be respectful of their opinions and hopefully in return they will be more respective of yours.

After providing the acknowledgement, the question asker is far more likely to at least listen to the next sentence that you have to say. At this point you can then move onto the second phase, which is Deflection. Deflection is all about trying to deal with the question as quickly as possible to allow you to return to your presentation. This is not by any means a deceptive maneuver but rather your purpose in returning to the presentation is because you truly feel it will be more effective at meeting the audience’s needs.

A good example of a paired acknowledgement & deflection technique in this situation is, “Thank you very much for that question. I think I could do an even better job at answering it through if we can wait until a little later in the presentation”. In this example, the question asker was put a little more at ease by saying that yes their question is important and worthwhile but that you can meet their needs even better if they’re willing to wait just a little while longer.

Most people are at heart generally reasonable and would be receptive to the offer since they have made the commitment to be there for the whole presentation anyways. However, if the question asker continues to press, you can also consider one of the other deflection approaches suggested in this document.

**Solution #2:** An exception to when it is okay to switch to other slides, is the case of either appendix/backup slides or “extra presentations” as discussed in the Importance of Time section. In these cases, though you planned ahead of time to make that jump so you are still giving the presentation that you wanted and have maintained control. Don’t be afraid to still use an Acknowledgement & Deflection technique if you feel you are running short on time or want to make the jump later or at the end of your presentation.

**Situation #3:** A question is raised that you know you could answer but the answer may be rather long or may take some additional time to explain particularly since they haven’t seen all of your presentation.

**Common Mistake:** You attempt to provide a shortened version that doesn’t have all of the details nor fully address the question.

**Mistake’s Common Result:** Although you may feel like you’re doing a good job and have suddenly devised a way to trim out the unnecessary details, this can be risky and the shorter answer may again lead to misconceptions. This in turn can lead to more questions and conjectures which again eat up more of your time than you would like.

Additionally is not uncommon in these cases that even if your shortened answer has pacified the audience and no more questions come immediately, their misconceptions still exist and can go undetected. Think about a time when you were in class and had asked a question of a professor who gave you a shortened off-the-cuff response that allowed them to continue with the lecture, but then later on you were left with the feeling “but wait a minute, before you said… …so how can what you’re now saying be true?”. This can happen to you as well and although you still believe your shortened answer was very good, remember you can connect the dots and fill in the gaps more easily than your audience can. Seemingly handled questions like these may also make it harder for you to understand where an audience member’s misconception is coming from later on in the presentation.

**Solution #1:** Try to determine prior to your presentation what are some of the likely in-depth questions you might get. Then prior to your presentation you can develop what your short answer might be, i.e. what to cut and what to leave it, while you can be calm and reflective instead of being on the spot. Depending on your presentation and the question, additionally you can also use the appendix slides or the “extra” presentations discussed in the Importance of Time section as well.

**Solution #2:** You didn’t plan for that kind of question (don’t worry, that happens to everyone). Making up a shortened answer feels risky in this case so you can use an Acknowledgement & Deflection technique instead (see Situation #1). A good example of a paired acknowledgement & deflection technique in this situation is, “Thank you very much for that question. I think the answer might be a little bit long so it might be better is we wait until the end of the presentation. But make sure we do discuss it, as I think it’s a good question”. Here the acknowledgement actually sandwiches the deflection to make sure the audience member perceives that you are treating their question, and hence their needs, seriously.

**Solution #3:** Take the time hit and explain the answer well. Just be sure you planned time for questions and that watch your time all the more carefully as you proceed.

**Situation #4:** A question is asked that you are not prepared to answer during the presentation

**Common Mistake:** You try to come up with an answer anyway, taking your best guess, potentially given rough numbers that you feel are a good approximation, thinking it’s better to offer some answer rather than just look ‘dumb’.

**Mistake’s Common Result #1:** You could be called on it, with the audience asking more information/justification particularly if it doesn’t sit quite right with the audience’s intuition. Ultimately you wind up looking ‘dumb’ anyway. However now you’ve lost some of the audience’s trust and they begin to question the rest of the information you are presenting.

**Mistake’s Common Result #2:** The audience seems satisfied with the answer. The only problem is later on you discover that the information is false or even worse the audience recognizes the error before you do. This also throws the rest of your claims into question as well and you have to deal with the fallout.

**Mistake’s Common Result #3:** The audience really likes the answer. So much that they hold you accountable to it but you later realize that achieving the answer you gave is near impossible or at least would be very difficult or costly to achieve. Owning up to this can be embarrassing to say the least and this also throws the rest of your claims into question as well.

**Solution #1:** Do not promise you will absolutely do something during the presentation (unless your boss absolutely makes you) and do not make up numbers. Instead if you do provide any estimates, at the very least, make sure your audience is well aware of this and have someone you’re presenting with, or a colleague in the audience take notes of what estimates you gave so you can go back and reconfirm as soon as possible. You may need to send a small correction email stating the proper numbers but that is far better than waiting until your next presentation and having someone get upset with you that they were mislead in your last presentation.

**Solution #2:** Do not promise you will absolutely do something during the presentation (unless your boss absolutely makes you) and do not make up numbers. Instead you can apply an Acknowledgement & Deflection technique (see Situation #1). A good example of a paired acknowledgement & deflection technique in this situation is, “Thank you very much for that question. I’d like to make sure I get you the exact number so let me look that up and send that to you in an email” or “Thank you very much for that question. That’s a little outside the scope of this presentation but I’d be happy to set up another meeting with you afterwards to discuss it more.” Both of these have the advantage of buying you extra time to look up the number or other information that is being asked for while at the same time letting your audience know that their need is important enough that you are willing to spend extra time to address it properly. It is imperative however that you do send that email or try to set up that extra meeting because if you don’t, they will remember and one way or another they will let you know that you did not remember.

**Situation #5:** The discussion around a topic has gone on far longer than you hoped for and potentially beyond your control.

**Common Mistake:** You elevate your tone to express your authority over the group, essentially telling everyone to drop it for now.

**Mistake’s Common Result #1:** Although this can occasionally work and has a better chance if you are the highest authority in the room, it doesn’t leave anyone with a good feeling. Your audience may be left quietly stewing and most likely is not paying as close attention to you at least for your next few slides. Your audience may also be quicker to snap at you for the rest of the presentation.

**Mistake’s Common Result #2:** The audience pushes back more and the situation becomes more enflamed. This in turn may make you want to evaluate your tone further and the situation worsens until finally someone realizes this is counterproductive but nobody wins for now.

**Solution #1:** Use an Acknowledgement & Deflection technique (see Situation #1). A good example of a paired acknowledgement & deflection technique in this situation is, “I appreciate the discussion we’ve been having and we can continue it but I’m afraid if we do so we may run over time” or “A lot of good points are being raised so thank you. However, I know that there is information that other members of the audience need to hear so it may be best we continue.” Both of these cases give good reasons for wanting to move on and apply some peer pressure as well. The second case appeals to the fact that other people have needs as well and the people caught up in the discussion may be monopolizing the time. The first case, particularly if directed at an individual, politely states that it is not you as the presenter that will be making things runs late it’s “that guy”, and as nobody wants to be “that guy” the peer pressure feeling of the rest of the audience can help make that individual back down.

**Solution #2:** Maintain your current calmer tone and attempt to bring it to closure. This solution can be paired with something similar to Solution #1. The important point here is that you do not allow yourself to become heated as well. People naturally mirror each other. So when someone has an elevated tone, you may naturally raise your tone as well, which in turn causes the other person to raise their tone and so on. However this mirroring instinct can also work to your advantage. If you consciously maintain your calmer professional tone, the audience member will come down to your level to mirror you. It may take a few exchanges but it can work quite well.

Another interesting approach is to lower your voice so that it is just loud enough for your audience to hear. As you are the presenter, everyone will instinctively and instantly be quite to hear what you have to say. Try it. You’ll be surprised how well it can work.

With either solution, if the discussion still continues on, more likely than not an audience member may help come to your rescue echoing that we should table the matter for now and allow you to continue. In both solutions you handled yourself in a professional manner showing respect for the audience while holding true to your responsibility as the presenter. The majority of the audience will recognize this and at least be sympathetic to your efforts.

**Reviewing Your Presentation**

It is always important and worthwhile to review your presentation after you have created it. Since you can be very familiar with your topic (probably far more familiar than your audience, otherwise why would they bother to attend your presentation?) it can often be hard to remember what it’s like not to know something. As evidence to this, just think about your professors. They’ve become such experts in their subject matters that you can likely think of at least a few occasions where it has been difficult for them to explain it.

As way to help be conscious of this, begin reviewing your first slide and assume your audience knows as little as possible (or plausible), which in most real word cases is far less than you might hope. Then write down what they know after seeing that first slide (or first point on the first slide), then with every proceeding slide ask whether they would be able to make the next jump. Or said another way, ask what would they need to make that next jump and then HONESTLY critique whether your presentation can enable them to make that jump.

One of the most common mistakes is to assume that your audience “will just get it”. Sometimes it can be helpful to start at the middle of your slides, perhaps right after one of your key conclusions, and then review your slides backwards. As you go backwards, ask “in order to reach this conclusion, they would have to know ‘x’. But in order to understand ‘x’, they would need to know ‘y’and ‘z’…” and continue down this path until you reach what you assume is the audience’s starting minimal starting knowledge. Then you can check whether your presentation provides that ‘x’, ‘y’, and ‘z’ in the proper order.

Just remember though, even when teaching a course or training session you are not expected to tell the audience every detail. Ask yourself again “Do they really need to know everything?” As a good check, try to see if leaving out these details might cause any misconceptions. If you can make your message clear with reasonable support but without those additional details, then it’s best to leave them out.

Furthermore, adding extra details to try to show just how smart you are is rarely productive. Instead showing your results and let them speak for themselves is far more professional and remember, presentations are not tests. The goal is not to say or measure everything you know. Your goal and responsibility is to help your audience understand the material and its value. If test taking has been become too engrained into your thinking, instead think of presentation creation as a game such that you score points for how well your audience understands your presentation’s information but the goal is to reach a high score in as few slides/talking points/examples as possible.

For details you decide not to include, it is common to offer other resources as a source for these details, such as potentially a report you’ve written, or a text book, or technical paper. In fact, many times presentations are meant to give only the overview and conclusions with only a few key details and thereby act almost as a “teaser” to encourage the audience to read the associated reports. The one thing to be careful of when making references to other documents in your presentation, however, is to make sure your audience can follow your presentation and its main ideas without having to have read the full report ahead of time. (because they rarely do, even if it’s “required”)

Finally reherse, reherse, reherse. And in doing so show your slides to your friends and be very conscious of what they perceive as being the main takeaways. Also ask them questions like “what is the first thing you notice on the slide?”. If it isn’t what you want, this should be a warning that you will have to do something either in re-designing the slide or in the way you deliver the slide in your presentation. The key to good writing is good re-writing and the same can be said for presentation development as well.

As a final check, try to go though your slides and think about what are some questions that you might expect. A list of common questions that are good to prepare for ahead of time are included below.

**Common Questions:**

* What if you had less (half the, 10% less, etc.) resources, what would be the 1st thing you would cut?
* What if you had more (twice as many, 10% more, etc.) resources what would you add?
* What is the range of error in your calculations?
* What are the main sources of error in your calculations?
* What are your remaining largest concerns?
* How do you plan to mitigate those risks?
* How do you intend to test for that?
* What can you guarantee you can deliver by “x” date?
* How much of this is “new work” being done by your group and how much is being reused?
* If these concerns turn out to be true, how are you going to deal with that? What will you still be able to deliver? And how will that affect your overall project performance?