

You're going to flub that joke in your presentation. Try this instead

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Delivering an effective joke during a presentation is much harder than it looks. These other methods can capture your audience's attention, without risking your credibility.

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By [Anett Grant](#) 3 minute Read

You've probably heard the advice that you should start your presentation with a joke. It breaks the ice, right? But unless you're a talented comedian, you might end up ruining your talk. Here are four reasons why using humor in your speech—not just as an icebreaker to kick things off, but at any point in your talk—can be a recipe for trouble, and what to do instead.

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1. Warm-up gags don't always land

If your audience isn't prepared for your joke, it's going to fall flat. They need to be ready to laugh. Even the best stand-up comedians have warm-up acts that come on stage first to prime the audience. As [Michael Grothaus previously wrote in *Fast Company*](#), speakers who drop jokes out of the blue usually fail. "It's because doing so comes off as trying too hard—the humor equivalent of a nervous tick."

Rather than telling a joke, warm up your audience by giving them something to ponder or think about. An effective way to do this is to share something unfamiliar, like a conversation you had where somebody shared surprising news or information with you. This can make you sound interesting right away, with none of the risk of trying to land a punchline.

2. Self-deprecating humor undermines your credibility

There's one pretty fail-safe rule in business presentations: maintain a positive tone. Jokes often involve put-downs, which can introduce negativity even when you're trying to stay lighthearted or self-deprecating. Now, it's obvious why you wouldn't want to make a joke at a colleague's expense. But you might be wondering, what's the harm in making fun of yourself?

I once worked with a business leader who was a retired Navy admiral. He wanted to use self-deprecating humor in his presentation. "It worked for me in the Navy!" he told me. But here's

the problem: As a high-ranking officer, he automatically commanded respect based on his title—and he wasn't about to lose it by being overly modest. Unfortunately, most professional settings don't work that way. You have to earn respect even if you're in a leadership role. Even the most good-humored, well-intentioned self-effacing jokes can dampen your efforts on that front.

That doesn't mean you should shun vulnerability, though. Showing humility can actually be an effective speaking technique, provided that you don't undercut yourself. For example, say you're talking about a weakness of yours. Rather than stopping there, elaborate on the steps you're taking to improve it. That way, you're not lowering the audience's expectations and perception of you, while still sharing something personal.

3. Your main job isn't to entertain

Fundamentally, the purpose of humor isn't to establish a connection, but to entertain. But in business settings, the crowd isn't coming to you for entertainment—most likely, they're there to learn.

One of the best ways to make sure your listeners leave with new knowledge and/or a sense of connection is to tell a story that makes a relevant point. The best stories are ordinary anecdotes that nearly everyone can identify with. If you can craft a narrative that's both engaging and directly related to your main argument, you'll connect with your audience far more effectively than you would with jokes.

4. Not everyone can be a comedian

This might be a harsh truth to hear, but comedy is difficult—even for professionals. A good comedian has to do more than come up with great jokes. They also need to master the delivery. If two people deliver the exact same wisecrack, one person could get a room full of laughs, and the other could hear crickets.

You also risk messing up your punchline, leaving both you and the audience confused and uncomfortable. “A joke with a failed punchline will make you look foolish, which is of course a terrible way to launch a presentation,” one *Fast Company* contributor pointed out a few years ago. It's pretty timeless advice. If you're nervous about presenting in the first place, trying to earn laughs only raises your odds of a failed delivery.

We all like to laugh every now and again, even at work. But when it comes to incorporating humor in business presentations, it's better to err on the side of caution. So rely on these other methods to get your audience to listen—since that's more important than laughter anyway.