

Prioritize the needs of the audience when giving a presentation

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CAREER FEATURE

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Speakers inadvertently prepare presentations for themselves rather than their audiences. A few mental exercises can help presenters to avoid this pitfall.



Audiences can quickly become bored listening to a poorly designed presentation. Credit: Barry Diomedé/Alamy

Most scientists can recall wasting time listening to a poorly designed talk, whether it was at a conference, a guest speaker event or an internal department seminar. The speaker might have presented too many slides, too many specialized concepts and too many random ideas for the audience to digest. Some slides might well have contained enough detail for an entire presentation.

I usually begin my presentation training class by showing such an overly complicated slide. “Why would anyone show this?” I ask.

Participants often offer diverse motivations, from overcoming anxiety (“I like having all my data in front of me”) to ease (“The figure was from a journal article, so it was easy to copy”) to avoidance (“No one could ask a question about such a confusing slide”). I hear many justifications, but they tend to have a common theme: all serve the speaker, not the audience.

Unknowingly, speakers make it easier for themselves at the expense of their audience. Correcting this misdirection is the key to creating and delivering an effective scientific presentation.

This inward focus might be an inherent behaviour trait, but scientific research exacerbates it. Months of painstaking work make every detail seem crucial, and speakers falsely assume that those details are also crucial to an audience. Long hours in the laboratory thinking about research create a misconception that highly specialized knowledge is widely understood. It is hard to remember what you once didn't know!

Inward-looking speakers are doomed to poor presentation technique until they learn to prioritize the audience's needs over their own. In addition to the problems described above, ineffective speakers show a near-universal tendency to speed up in response to time pressure; a practice that gives the presenter a sense of being comprehensive, but only confuses the audience.

Presentation tips

The following mental exercises can help speakers to avoid inward focus and enable the audience to provide constructive feedback.

Take some time to consider who might attend. There's no such thing as a talk for scientists 'in your field'. Science is super specialized, meaning every scientific audience contains a degree of diversity. A cancer biologist studying how a particular protein affects the colon might well benefit from a talk on mass spectroscopy techniques, but will they understand the language of a specialized bioengineer?

Think about the range of intellectual backgrounds from which the audience might hail; will there be scientists from your focused sub-discipline, related disciplines or areas with untapped potential for collaboration? Ask the host how the talk was advertised — to a single academic department or across an entire school? Can you transmit the core message to less-expert listeners, even if they can't understand the details included for the specialists?

Think about what attendees will remember 24 hours after your talk. No matter how good your talk, attendees won't remember much a day later; perhaps just the core message and one or two of your most compelling slides. So what is your core message, and does your presentation convey it clearly? Are your most important slides drawn distinctly? Slide presentations can inspire attendees to read your journal article, provide useful feedback, ask important questions or think about collaborations. But by themselves, they cannot transmit detail in a lasting manner.

Identify the core message of each slide. Every single slide should have a single core message. Can you articulate it in a sentence or two? Do the slide titles help to explain the message? Does the slide content support those key ideas? Have you included material superfluous to that message?

Prepare for a time crunch. Time is almost always an issue. A talk could start late, there might be problems with the projection technology and there might be important questions from the audience. What can you summarize or skip if time runs short? How will your time-management strategy change if the delay occurs at the beginning as opposed to the end? Speeding up is not the answer.

Formal training in presentation design can help to convert these considerations into compelling communication techniques. But even without such training, by recognizing the natural tendency to look inward and using these mental exercises to redirect your talk, you will be on the road to better presentations.

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