



# Book Resonate

## Present Visual Stories that Transform Audiences

Nancy Duarte  
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### Recommendation

Presentations can affect decisions at the highest levels of business, but, alas, most presentations fail. Many speakers mystify their audiences with annoying jargon, bore them with banalities and put them to sleep with endless slides. In this beautifully designed volume – though some may find that some of the lovely white space could have been used to add a little more meaty material to the text – presentation expert and graphic designer Nancy Duarte teaches speakers how to employ storytelling and screenwriting techniques to make powerful, effective presentations. Nicely written and featuring eye-catching graphics, Duarte’s manual is instructive, entertaining and often moving. *BooksInShort* thinks her advice can help you become a better storyteller and, thus, a better presenter.

### Take-Aways

- When speakers prepare and execute presentations properly, they can be singularly effective change agents.
- Format your presentations as stories to hold and stir your audience.
- Employ storytelling and screenwriting techniques.
- Your presentation story needs a hero, and that hero is your audience.
- Your role as presenter is to serve as mentor to your audience by humbly sharing your knowledge and wisdom.
- Learn about your audience. Find out what resonates most strongly with them. Adjust your presentation accordingly.
- Start by brainstorming concepts for your talk and narrow them down as you polish.
- Prepare your presentation with uncluttered visuals, and then practice again and again.
- You want to transform the audience and move it from “what is” to “what could be.”
- Include a “STAR” moment – “something they’ll always remember.”

### Summary

#### Presentation Storytelling

Film director Alfred Hitchcock was fastidious when planning and organizing his films. He coordinated all the complex components of moviemaking: costumes, visual effects, sets, production elements, shot lists, camera angles, scenes and storyboards.

Actress Janet Leigh explained, “In his mind, and sketched on the pages of his script, the film was already shot. He showed me the model sets and moved the miniature camera through the tiny furniture toward the wee dolls, exactly the way he intended to do in the ‘reel’ life. Meticulously thorough down to the minutest detail.” Or as Hitchcock told French film director François Truffaut, “I never look at a script while I’m shooting. I know the whole film by heart.”

“Presentations fail because of too much information, not too little.”

Hitchcock sets a great example. When delivering a presentation, adopt his scrupulous attention to detail and tell powerful stories. When you set your talks within a story framework, your presentations will be memorable and will engage your audience. Compelling stories deliver meaning and information while enabling your audience to see and feel your message.

“Great presenters transform audiences. Truly great communicators make it look easy, as they lure audiences to adopt their ideas and take action.”

The presentations that engross people tell stories. In 1863, German dramatist Gustav Freytag created a graphic depicting the “five-act structure” of ancient Greek dramas and Shakespearean plays. The graphic illustrates a story’s dramatic shape as it moves through five phases: “exposition, rising action, climax, falling action” and “denouement.” Shape your presentations according to this structure. A strong dramatic framework means your audience will remain connected to every point you make.

“Unorganized presentations follow an invisible neurotic pathway that only makes sense to the presenter.”

Presentations are not the same as stories. They seldom feature a single protagonist whose journey proceeds to a dramatic climax. Presentations have multiple peaks. They are more layered than stories and must explain problems or offer information. Yet the story framework can work wonders. Stories have an almost mystical power that has inspired audiences for thousands of years. Exploit this power in your presentations.

## **Presentation Failures**

Many presentations are boring, banal and inert. Those offensive qualities are particularly troublesome for today’s busy audience members who tend to have short attention spans. Film directors and advertising agencies expertly use up-tempo production techniques to rev up their audiences’ excitement and interest. This puts speechmakers at a disadvantage.

“If you don’t map out where you want the audience to be when they leave your presentation, the audience won’t get there.”

Most presentations fail to captivate their listeners. However, a sound presentation holds an advantage over any mass-market message. A good presenter leverages “human contact” to bring about change in audiences’ attitudes and actions. To enact that shift, you must present your ideas well.

## **Fascinating Ideas**

Select ideas you find compelling. They should stand out like someone wearing an orange safety vest in a roomful of people in suits. If you’re a presenter, you need to take a risk to rise above the herd. Don’t rely solely on facts. Get in touch with your emotions and your audiences’ interests.

“Gussying up slides that have meaningless content is like putting lipstick on a pig.”

Reports belaboring exhaustive information stand at one end of a spectrum; dramatic tales stand at the other. In the middle are explanatory presentations. Like a report, a good presentation contains information, but it should also include a story. When a presentation includes information and drama, it delivers a special experience to the audience.

## **The Audience as Hero**

Every story needs a hero. The hero of your presentation is never you. If it is, your audience will disengage. Your presentation’s hero is always the audience. As screenwriter Chad Hodge once wrote, business speakers should help “people to see themselves as the hero of the story, whether the plot involves beating the bad guys or achieving some great business objective. Everyone wants to be a star, or at least to feel that the story is talking to or about him personally.”

“Designing a presentation without an audience in mind is like writing a love letter and addressing it ‘to whom it may concern’.” (Ken Haemer, former AT&T presentation research manager)

You are the hero’s mentor; you are the Yoda to your audience’s Luke Skywalker. Your job – and a primary point of your presentation – is to help the hero, your audience, by providing information or knowledge that changes their lives for the better. Learn everything you can about the hero of your story, your audience members. Parse them according to demographics and other useful criteria, such as lifestyles, values and influencers. Find out who they are, not merely what they do. Consider your role as a mentor as you assemble the information you will convey. Establish common ground with your audience through shared experiences and mutual goals.

## **A Heroic Quest**

The Hero’s Journey, a story model “drawn from the psychology of Carl Jung and the mythological studies of Joseph Campbell,” offers a storytelling concept that analyst Christopher Vogler conveys graphically by showing a circle to depict the journey of the hero. As the protagonists travel from the “ordinary world” to a “special world,” they encounter obstacles and road blocks, and learn lessons before making the return journey to the ordinary world.

“Creating an interesting presentation requires a more thoughtful process than throwing together the blather that we’ve come to call a presentation today.”

If your presentation is successful, you will take your audience members, the hero, to a special world, a place where they go on a quest that involves the new knowledge you give them. Your listeners may decide to move into your world, but they may not immediately assume your point of view. When your presentation inspires audience members to undergo an internal change of intention, they will alter their perceptions. When something in your presentation moves them forward, you encourage listeners to cross a threshold toward acting to fulfill your goal for them.

## **Resonance**

Every presentation should set out to be persuasive and to transform the audience in a beneficial way. Accomplishing these goals requires resonance, which “occurs when an object’s natural vibration frequency responds to an external stimulus of the same frequency.”

“If you don’t filter your presentation, the audience will respond negatively – because you’re making them work too hard to discern the most important

pieces.”

In nonscientific terms, you will achieve resonance when you tailor your presentation to the “frequency of your audience” in such a way that they experience the transformation that is your presentation’s goal. Audiences remain in stasis unless presenters get them to change; resonance generates that change.

## **The “Big Idea”**

A storytelling presentation requires resolving a conflict – that is, shifting from “what is” to “what could be.” Your content should point audience members toward the destination you’ve chosen to pursue. Explicitly map things out for them as you explain your overall message or big idea. Develop stories that make your big idea meaningful. Think about your life, and try to match your presentation ideas with significant events.

“No matter how stimulating you make your plea, an audience will not act unless you describe a reward that makes it worthwhile.”

To organize your presentation, first generate ideas; consider as many concepts as possible to find your big idea. Sift through the concepts to find the ones that deliver “ethical appeal, emotional appeal” and “logical appeal.” Evaluate your ideas with your mind and your heart. When you identify the best ones, cluster them. Arrange them to develop your messages, slotting them into the right order for maximum effect. Do your research beforehand and learn about your crowd. Each audience prefers a certain “content contour” in order to hear and retain information.

“While entertainment has raised the bar for audience engagement, presentations have become less engaging than ever.”

Sort your messages for optimum impact by providing “emotional contrast.” In order to build a balanced pace, alternate “analytical content” – such as facts, case studies, examples and documentation – with “emotional content” – such as metaphors, analogies, humor and shocking statements. Vary your delivery to engage your audience members. Fluctuate from the traditional – for example, avoiding disruptions and using “the stage as is” – to the nontraditional – for example, organizing and creating disruptions, and employing “the stage as a setting.”

“Presentations are not to be viewed as an opportunity to prove how brilliant you are.”

Your big concept should articulate your viewpoint and spell out the stakes at hand in this conversation with the audience. Explain why your audience should care about your message and the transformation you seek for them. Use a complete sentence to set out the transformative goal, such as, “This software will make your team more productive and generate a million dollars in revenue over two years.” Expect resistance to your big idea. The reward your proposed solution will deliver should eliminate this resistance.

“An audience will not adopt your idea unless they understand it.”

Once you finalize your structure and message, transform your words into visual images. Keep them simple. Don’t clutter your slides with too much information, or with excess words or images. Produce slides to support your messages. Establish strong presentation turning points. Then, transform the topics in your presentation into various compelling messages, for example, “We have an aggressive competitor grabbing our market share.” When you are ready, practice. Then, practice again and again.

## **Adventure and Action**

A memorable presentation should jolt your listeners. Trust in the proper presentation components – a beginning, middle and end – by drawing on traditional storytelling structures from mythology, literature and film. Your presentation should feature two clear turning points: The first is the “call to adventure,” which represents the void between what is and what could be. The other is the “call to action,” which spells out what you want your audience to do or how your listeners must change.

## **“New Bliss”**

If you offer contrasting content in the middle of the presentation, you can use its “dramatic tension” to engage your audience. Inspire your audience at the end of your presentation. Explain that your idea is not only totally feasible but is your listeners’ best option.

“There’s something sacred about stories.”

When the audience members accept and adopt your presentation ideas, a sense of new bliss will inspire or energize them. Now is the time for the audience to cross the threshold and engage in action. If you handle your presentation properly, your audience will fully approve of your idea. But acceptance is only part of what you want; you want your listeners to act decisively on your call to action.

## **The “STAR Moment”**

Every presentation needs “something they’ll always remember,” a “STAR moment.” Create your moment by using sound bites, visuals and emotional storytelling. In 2008, Steve Jobs shared a quintessential star moment. He introduced Apple’s superthin MacBook Air notebook computer by sliding it easily into a manila envelope. Audience members frequently repeat such unforgettable presentation moments to others.

## **See Yourself on the Radio**

A presentation is like a radio broadcast. Make your presentation’s message – equivalent to a radio signal – strong and clear so your audience receives the information you hope to convey. To move an audience, the presenter must tune into its special “resonant frequency.” Your big idea must tune out all irrelevant frequencies. Pay attention to your presentation’s “signal-to-noise ratio.” Eliminate as much noise as possible. Noise takes four forms:

1. **“Credibility noise”** – You make a poor first impression and people don’t believe you.
2. **“Semantic noise”** – You use too much jargon or too many buzzwords.
3. **“Experiential noise”** – You exhibit poor body language.
4. **“Bias noise”** – Your material is self-centered.

To screen for noise before the main event, present your program to candid critics.

People have put these powerful presentation techniques and tools to work to achieve evil purposes. Think of how Enron executives fooled their investors, employees and public constituencies. Adhere to the goal of making the world better, not worse.

## About the Author

**Nancy Duarte**, CEO of Duarte Inc., wrote the best-selling and award-winning book *Slideology*. She serves as a TED Fellows committee member and presented at TEDxEast.

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