

Presenting: easier than you think... with these 5 essentials!

door

David Bloch



There is a significant chance that you have a very clear idea about what a lecture or speech looks like: what it consists of, how the speaker behaves, the sort of setting... and perhaps you even have a picture in your mind of how easy it is for the listener to follow, how interesting or exciting the lecture is.

Whatever your picture, one thing is certain: if you want to be successful in teaching – in *reaching* and *motivating* your listeners – then it is to your advantage to learn how to give a *presentation*, not a *lecture*!

Five essentials

When you master and use these five essential presentation skills, you *will* reach your audience. Furthermore, you will feel more confident, be more in charge of the situation, achieve better results, and both you and your listeners will have more fun. And, whether you like it or not, we all learn better when we're enjoying ourselves!

The five essentials are:

- 1) *start*
- 2) *end*
- 3) *contact (nv)*
- 4) *contact (v)*
- 5) *presentation aids*

As you learn these five basic skills, you'll also pick up a large number of useful tips and insights. Let's look at each one in turn.

1) Start

Get to the point

The famous British conductor, Sir Thomas Beecham, once remarked: "The audience is only interested in the beginning and the ending." This is as good a reason as any to start in an original way, which guarantees that the listener quickly – within 45 seconds – knows *why* he is sitting there and *why* he should pay attention to you.

Be original

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once remarked that everybody is born original, but most people die as copies. How do most lectures begin?

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, I..."

Dare to display *your* originality by letting go of this cliché (see below for alternatives!).

The listener is important

Before you read the solutions, please think for a moment about who is more important when you present: you, or your listeners? If your answer is "I am", then put this article aside – it's not for you! However, if you are willing to have your listeners feel more important, then realise that your most powerful word is 'you' (not 'I'). This is especially true at the beginning of your

presentation, and the best speakers apply it *throughout*. (Essential 4 explores this point in depth.)

It is in your best interests to realise that the listener is there for himself, **not** for you. He chooses to be there, to spend his irreplaceable time listening to what you have to say.

Two points of note

1. It may surprise you to know that listeners come for two basic reasons: to feel good about themselves (to receive validation), and to get solutions to problems they may have.
2. You *never* speak to an *audience*, but *with individuals* who have come together in the same place at the same time. Each listener listens and evaluates for himself.

Solutions

Here are four highly effective ways of starting your presentation:

1. Use a statistic to describe for example how many patients are affected by such-and-such an illness, and some statistics about success rates or costs of treatment. Select shocking, surprising or amazing statistics. Keep it short!
2. Quote an authority on the subject. Read a few striking lines from a report. Present a controversial statement or proposition. Read the text from an advertisement for a (well-known) product in your field. Whatever you choose, let it be 'food for thought'. Keep it short, and take your time. Make it clear you are reading it aloud (and then put the piece of paper down!).
3. Raise your left hand slightly, palm open, and start with the word: "Imagine..."
Go on to describe a common-or-garden situation that everyone can recognise. Describe a problem that arises. Pose the rhetorical question: "What should/would you do in such a situation?" Use this as the basis, as a metaphor, for what your listeners are going to learn.
4. Raise your left, wait, then ask a direct question: "How many of you here today...?"
And maybe a second or third question. Important: the question must be phrased positively and the answer you expect is also positive.

How these solutions work

You begin in an original way, without clichés. You begin with the listeners and get them interested immediately. You give them a reason for sitting there, and you let them know very quickly that you're in charge and that you know where you're going. Furthermore, this approach brings you into direct contact with your listeners. The better the contact, the better *they* listen and the better *you* feel.

Tip

Select the one solution that most appeals to you. Use it. Use it regularly. Practise it until you feel totally comfortable with it. Move on to one of the others and repeat the process. One speaker begins *every* presentation with a quotation from Winnie-the-Pooh, regardless of the situation. He has become well known for this amusing personality quirk. After all, he's the one who makes it relevant!

Next steps

After such a beginning, use one simple sentence to link to the reason for being present, and provide a view of the *result*, of what the listener can expect to know or experience by the end of the presentation. Important: you do *not* need to explain in detail all the steps you're going to cover: simply get straight into the first point, deal with that and move on to your second point. And so on, until you reach the result you've already described.

2) End

Avoid clichés

Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to conclude forcefully? So many lectures end with something boring and predictable like: “Well, ladies and gentlemen, that just about ties it up for now. Thank you for your attention. Are there are any questions?”

Here is a framework for a powerful conclusion in which you can review at least four major points from your presentation, and end up by giving the listener the responsibility of doing something with what he’s heard.

Please note that if he’s not supposed to do anything with the information, you shouldn’t be presenting!

Step 1: use an indicator of time

... the last ten minutes...

In this short review of subject X...

Step 2: one sentence including ‘we’

We have spent the last ten minutes reviewing the most recent advances in subject X.

Step 3: three separate statements using ‘you’

You have heard how important ABC is in supporting the treatment...

You have seen how the scans verify...

You now have a better understanding of...

Step 4: conclude, motivate, give responsibility and end with ‘you’

With the insights you’ve gained today into subject X, the success of your future clinical trials is now up to you!

Some additional rules

- Always pause and breathe out between the sentences.
- Resist every temptation to string the concluding statements together with ‘and’.
- Resist every temptation to say ‘I, my, mine’. You ONLY use ‘we’ (once) and the rest is ONLY ‘you, your’.
- These final statements only include information the listener has already heard (in the body of your presentation).
- The second, third and fourth sentences should use a selection of expressions such as: seen, heard, gained an impression of, got a taste of the possibilities, understood.
- Keep your sentences positive.
- End the last sentence by raising your voice in volume and/or intonation. (Think in terms of an exclamation mark!) Take your time, *especially* with the last few words.
- NEVER ‘thank for the attention’. (Your audience should thank *you* for your sparkling presentation – with applause or sounds and nods of appreciation.)

3. Contact (nv)

Your three most powerful presentation tools are:

- silence
- eye contact
- smile

It is this combination that makes your silence *functional*. If you are silent and just look up at the ceiling, or stare at one listener with your jaws clamped together, your silence is non-functional.

A powerful presenter has learned that it is his silences that provide his words with impact.

Furthermore, it is your task to look at everyone in the hall – or, in the case of a congress, to give the *impression* that you are looking at everyone.

Take your time.
And smile.

This means: open your mouth. Relax your lower jaw. Which helps you to breathe out. Yes, it's *not* about breathing in, but about breathing out. That's how you'll relax and get more fuel for your voice. Besides, when you open your mouth (show your teeth!) you come across *as if* you were smiling.

Before you speak, walk to where you want to start speaking... and WAIT. Look around, breathe out through your mouth. Take your time.

See if you can breathe out three times, consciously, standing absolutely still as you look around. Then, and only then, may you begin to talk.

Adopt this pose regularly during your presentation. It's the 'neutral position' which will help you to stay calm and present – for your listeners.

When you have finished the body of your talk, switch off all visual aids, get the lighting back on, flip the flipover to a blank sheet and come into this neutral position before you launch into your "we..., you..." conclusion.

When you have said your last 'you!', come into the neutral position, wait, breathe out... then nod your head gently once. You can take a step back if you like, to indicate that you really are finished.

Tip: the clearer your rise in volume and intonation and the longer you wait before you nod, the more chance you have of getting the applause you may deserve!

4. Contact (v)

The more contact you have with your listener, the more effective your presentation will be and the better you will feel. It is human to want to have contact, and we learn better with contact. Here are some pointers to help you improve your chances of contact:

➤ You now know that the listener is more important than you are. You've also read that 'you' is more important than 'I'. Can you imagine that you come across as more impartial when you remove or severely restrict the word 'I' in your presentation? You may be sure it does wonders for your credibility and the impression it gives of your objectivity.

Thus, instead of: "I am now going to show you..." say: "You will now see..." You may also want to use the 'we' style: "Let's now take a look at... and we can investigate the effects of..."

Tip: reserve 'I' for your anecdotes.

➤ Instead of *telling* all the time, ask more questions. Include your listeners in your presentation by using the *rhetorical* question. How does that work? Simply by asking a question, pausing briefly, and then providing the answer yourself. Involve your listeners by asking them positively phrased *closed* questions to which they can respond positively.

For example: "And how many of you have already tried out this new technique?"

When you raise your left hand and wait for a response, you *will* get it. In more intimate training sessions, the *open* question is a great way to stimulate interaction with the listeners. Questions beginning with *what, who, which, how, where, and when* are the best. Important: avoid asking *why* (keep this for rhetorical questions).

➤ Dare to use the *imperative*. Just soften your voice. Guide your listeners by saying:

"Look at this slide for a moment."

"Take a moment to review your notes."

"Imagine what would happen if..."

“Stop and think about the implications of...”

The imperative is a very powerful communication tool!

➤ Use ‘bridging expressions’ to tell known facts:

“You’ll surely agree that...”

“At one time or another you’ve all experienced that...”

“You can probably appreciate that...”

The result is that you’ll get a ‘yes’ answer, either in the form of a nod or simply that a listener *thinks* his agreement.

5. Presentation aids

You’ll surely agree that there are more aids (notice the ‘bridging expression’?) than just *visual* aids. From flipover to slides to computer-generated presentations. There are whole books written just about such presentation aids, so here is a brief selection of tips to help you on your way:

➤ *You* are your very best presentation support. If you have three points, indicate them on your fingers. If you want to present two possible solutions, talk about one solution from one place then move your body a few metres aside to talk about the other solution.

➤ *Never* compete with what you project on the screen. Always introduce what your listeners will be looking at next, give them time to absorb what they’re seeing (it gives you an excellent moment to relax in the neutral position) before you go on to talk about what you’ve projected. Always summarise what they’ve seen and heard before introducing the next item.

➤ *Always* begin and end your presentation with yourself, without any ‘competition’ from visual aids.

➤ When designing your visual aids, remember to ask yourself the vital question: “Do I want *readers* or *listeners*?”

Make sure that *you* have something to add – if your slides tell the story, then *you* are redundant.

➤ In small groups (up to about 25) also use the flipover, even if it’s only for a few figures or a simple chart. Vary your colours and talk only when you have eye contact. You may even prepare part of what you wish to present in advance.

➤ Your chairman is also a presentation aid. Make sure he gives you the introduction you need to support you, how you wish to come across, and what you want to get across!

➤ Make your presentation as tangible as possible. Show the instrument you’re talking about. Show the sample. Hold up the package of the product in question.

Finally...

While these five essentials are only the tip of the iceberg, they alone will ensure that your lecture begins to develop into an interesting and interactive presentation.

And like the iceberg, which only hints at what’s beneath the surface, so too will you discover how much more there is to learn before you *are* that confident and successful trainer, presenter and communicator.

P.S. Some common myths

- The audience is here for you.
- The audience is homogeneous.
- The listeners hear, understand and remember everything you say the first time.
- The best way to make sure you have everyone's attention at the beginning is by telling a joke.
- The listeners can see the screen through your body.
- Listeners stay awake after lunch when you dim the lights and speak in a monotone.
- When you speak faster you can get more information across.
- When you use two screens you can get more information across in the short time you have.
- Your 'time to stop' is indicated by the 'time to start' of the next speaker.
- Your (non-native) listeners can understand your (non-native) English.
- It's all right to read from the screen.
- It's better not to be distracted by looking at the audience.
- It's important to project what you're telling, so that there's always something on the screen.
- You're more credible when you use long sentences and difficult words.
- It's important to try to tell everything you know about the subject.
- You're only credible when you're serious.
- You're only credible when you're telling something new.
- You're boring when you tell things your listeners already know.
- A laser-pointer is one of the best tools to indicate what you're talking about.
- Reading from paper is the best way to make sure you tell everything and get your message across.
- The content is more important than the packaging.
- You can improve your presentation without making any changes.
- The handout should contain copies of all your slides.