

Magazine

My word

How to give a bad talk Deborah St James

Over the years, I've listened to hundreds of scientific presentations, often given by brilliant scientists. A few were memorable; many were dull. Unfortunately, being an expert in your field is no guarantee that you will be an effective presenter. But the good news is that it's probably easier to learn to be an effective speaker than it is to become a brilliant scientist. And, although presentation skills alone won't get you to the top, they can certainly help.

Learning to be a better speaker requires a bit of time, motivation and practice but it's not rocket science. If you think about some of the worst speakers you've ever heard, they probably made one (or more) of the following obvious mistakes.

Saying too much. Voltaire put his finger on the problem when he said "The secret to being a bore is to tell everything." If a presentation doesn't leave a lasting impression, it's usually not because the speaker hasn't said enough, it's because he or she has tried to say too much in the time available. Audiences don't come to hear how smart you are; they come to get useful information. It's never easy to do, but try to remember that less is more and limit the number of main ideas you present.

Not meeting the needs of the audience. There is only one real secret to successful presentations: preparation. And the most important preparation you can do is to know your audience. The more you know about your listeners' education, experience, specialties and job responsibilities, as well as possible questions they might have, the closer you will come to meeting their needs. Each

audience is different, so the canned presentation won't work. Occasionally, I'm asked if I get bored giving the same talk all the time. The answer is that I've never given the same talk twice, because I've never had the same audience twice.

Not having a clear purpose. Before every presentation, ask yourself, What do I want the audience to do with this information? What is my goal? Do I need to inform, teach, stimulate, persuade, motivate, or provoke? If you don't know what the point of your talk is, it's unlikely that your audience will either. Go so far as to write out a purpose statement for each talk, and be prepared to answer the question: What is the take home message of this presentation?

The secret to being a bore is to tell everything

Lacking clear organization. There's no quicker way to get an audience to tune out than to ramble. Early in your presentation, give the audience an agenda, or map, of your main points. Then stick to it. Use transition words, such as 'first', 'next' and 'finally'. Like road signs on a map, these words will help lead your audience through the talk, so that at any point, they will know where you are, where you've been, and where you're going. It's okay to make occasional side trips, just be sure to always get back to the main highway.

Speaking with a monotonous voice. Have you ever heard a colleague you know to be enthusiastic and excited about his or her subject get up to speak about it and sound lifeless and dull? Audiences enjoy animated, enthusiastic speakers. You should be your own best visual aid. It might sound more like politics than science, but if you're serious

about getting your message across, it's worth working on voice inflection, pauses, eye contact, and appropriate body language and facial expressions. Use a microphone if you have a soft voice. Painful as it might be, critiquing yourself on videotape is the best way I know to improve as a speaker.

Reading the talk. Especially when you're nervous, it's tempting to have your talk written out in full, but almost always a talk will be better if it's not read verbatim. If you must read, practice, practice, practice. If you practice, your voice can convey confidence, credibility, animation and enthusiasm — four important components to any good talk.

Using unnecessary or unclear visual aids. How many times have you heard a speaker say "I know this is a bad slide and some of you can't see it, but...". If you have to apologize for a slide, get rid of it or re-do it. Every slide should have a purpose and be legible and readable — not just to you but to everyone in the room. Finally, in a scientific talk, simple is best — stick to one idea per slide. When designing your slides, avoid fancy design effects and colours; just because you can use them, doesn't mean you should.

If you can give a well-organized, snappy presentation, you're most of the way there. The icing on the cake is to give a talk that's also entertaining. Few people have the knack of successfully introducing humour into a scientific talk but, since the first grunt around the fire, humans have loved a good story. If you can do it right, an effective way to make a point memorable is to tell a story. Of course, if you can grip your audience with some really great science, you won't need any gimmicks to make the talk memorable — and that's the really tricky part.

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