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## TIPS FOR MAKING PRESENTATIONS MEMORABLE

As a communication professor and coach, I hear a lot from presenters about anxiety. Their two greatest fears:

1. They will forget what they intend to say, and
2. Their audience won't remember what they said.

These dual fears are certainly understandable and create much angst among nervous and novice presenters. However, by employing specific techniques and practices, **all presenters can deliver more memorable in-person and online presentations** that both the presenter and the audience will remember.

## SECRETS FOR REMEMBERING YOUR PRESENTATION

*Whether you are going to be presenting live online or in-person, prior to any effective presentation you must both remember and practice it. You can dramatically increase the likelihood of remembering all of your points by: (1) employing good presentation hygiene, (2) structuring your presentation, and (3) practicing properly.*



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## 1. SLEEP IN, REMEMBER MORE

The best preparation advice sounds like it comes straight from a parenting book. Make sure you eat right, exercise often, and sleep well. Research in wellness and memory clearly point to the importance of taking care of our bodies. In terms of consumption, when drafting a presentation as well as preparing to deliver one, you need to **mind your diet**. To begin, you should avoid sugar and caffeine. While these items can momentarily boost your energy, they always result in a sluggish fog after time passes. Rather, eat protein and complex carbohydrates. These foods help in memory formation and assist in the retention of ideas; additionally, they provide for a more constant energy level.

Like food, exercise can help memory by enhancing your energy level, reducing your stress, and increasing your memory formation and retention. A **regular exercise regimen** that supports your presentation preparation and memory should include both strength training and aerobic activity, such as walking or jogging, conducted at regular

### SWEET DREAMS...SWEETER SPEECHES

*Finally, sleep is critical to memory. Sleep researchers have now concluded that one of the most important aspects of sleep is to consolidate memories. You are much more likely to recall information if you are well rested from a **good night's sleep** than if you stay up all night trying to memorize your points. Further, getting a good night sleep allows you to better cope with any speaking anxiety symptoms that may arise.*



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## 2. MAKE A ROADMAP BEFORE YOU BUILD YOUR PRESENTATION

A powerful way to help you remember your presentation is to provide a meaningful structure to your content. Research shows that **people retain structured information up to 40% more reliably and accurately** than information that is presented in a more freeform manner. There are many presentation structures on which you can rely, including:

- Past-Present-Future — good for providing a history or stepping people through a process

- Comparison-Contrast — good for showing the relative advantages of your position
- Cause-Effect — good for helping people understand the underlying logic of your position

Having a structure helps you remember what you plan to say, because even if you forget the specifics, you can use the general framework to stay on track. For example, when using the Problem-Solution-Benefit structure — good for persuading and motivating people — you first lay out a specific problem (or opportunity), then you detail a solution to address the problem, and finally you define the benefits to your solution. If you are in the middle of the Solution portion of your talk and you blank out, then by simply thinking back to your structure, you know that the Benefits portion comes next.

My favorite structure is What?-So What?-Now What? This useful structure can help you not only in planned presentations but also in spontaneous speaking situations, such as job interviews. When using this structure, you start with your central claim (“I am qualified for this position because of my experience”) and then explain its importance or value (“This experience will allow me to start contributing to your firm immediately”) before concluding with a call to action or next steps (“So when can I start?”).



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### 3. PRACTICE OUT LOUD & STANDING UP

Practice is clearly important for remembering your presentation. However, many presenters don't practice properly. They simply mentally rehearse or flip through a slide deck, passive approaches that don't really simulate the conditions of a presentation. To practice effectively, you also need to **stand and deliver** — even if you are presenting virtually, you need to physically stand up to project effectively. Rather than only thinking through a presentation, standing up and practicing your speech helps you remember it. Specifically, hearing your own voice and using relevant, appropriate gestures improve later recall. You remember more because your mental imagery and physical practice use overlapping neural networks in your brain, improving what's known as memory consolidation, or the process by which a thought becomes cemented into your long-term memory.

One very useful technique, called **focused practice**, involves taking one aspect of your presentation — say, the introduction — and delivering it repeatedly until you become highly familiar and comfortable with it. (Note: You should *not* memorize your presentation, because memorizing invites blanking out.) Next, you move on to another aspect of your presentation, such as transitioning between two specific visual aids. Focused practice allows you to feel less anxious because you do not have to spend valuable mental effort thinking about all the particular aspects of your presentation at once.

The **location** where you practice your presentation should be in the place where you'll be presenting, or at least in a similar place. For example, if you are going to give a speech in a large room with big windows where people are quiet and attentive, you should practice giving the speech in a large room with windows. The context in which you learn helps you remember and will boost your confidence, since the surroundings will feel comfortable. This advice also works for presenting via the Web or teleconference. Practice in the room with the technology that you will be using. In fact, you should **always practice with the technology in advance of presenting**.

Through proper preparation, structure, and practice, you will be able to more easily remember your presentation. And the added confidence you will have in your memory will allow you to present in a more compelling manner.

Now, we must explore what you can do to make your presentation more memorable for those who listen to it.

## SECRETS FOR BEING MEMORABLE

*In a world saturated with information and presentations, being memorable is critical. One recent survey reported that technology workers hear on average one presentation a day. You need to make your presentations memorable if you are to have any chance of having your ideas live on and get traction. By invoking three key tools—variation, relevance, and emotion—you can help your audience to remember your content and call to action.*



## 4. VARY YOUR VOICE, EVIDENCE AND VISUALS

Your job as a presenter is to engage your audience, to pull them forward in their seats. Unfortunately, audiences can be easily distracted, and they habituate quickly. To counter these natural tendencies, you must diversify your material to keep people's attention, with variation in your voice, variation in your evidence, and variation in your visuals. You have likely been the victim of a monotonous speaker who drones on in a flat vocal style, like Ben Stein's character in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. **Vary your volume and speaking rate** to help keep your audience's attention and motivate them to listen. And by speaking expressively, your passion for your topic comes through. However, for many presenters, especially those newer to English, this type of speaking is not natural. I often instruct less expressive speakers to infuse their presentations with **emotive words**, such as "excited," "valuable," and "challenging," and to inflect their voice to reflect the meaning of these words. If you are speaking about a big opportunity, then speak "big" in a big way. With practice, you will feel more comfortable with this type of vocal variety.

Varying the type of evidence you use to support the claims in your presentation is equally important. Too often, presenters exclusively use their favorite type of evidence. You might over-rely on data or on anecdotes. But both qualitative and quantitative academic research have found that when you **triangulate your support** you provide more compelling and memorable results. So, try providing three different types of evidence, such as a data point, a testimonial, and an anecdote. This triangulation neatly reinforces your point, and it allows your audience multiple opportunities to connect with your idea and remember it, which is why it's a technique often used by advertisers to reinforce that you should buy their product.

By varying your voice and evidence, you will make the words you speak more memorable. But what your audience sees is also critical. Just as a monotonous speaker can cause mental shutdown in an audience, repetitive body movements, and slides jammed with words can fatigue and distract an audience. People are very poor multitaskers. When distracted by spurious gestures or a wall of bullet

points, audience members have fewer cognitive resources available to remember the content of what you're saying. To increase the variety of your nonverbal delivery (e.g., gestures and movement), audio record yourself delivering your presentation, then play the recording while you move and practice your gestures. Since you do not have to think about what to say, you can play with adding variation to your body movement without the distraction of speaking.

### LESS IS MORE: THINK VISUALLY

**Think visually** to rescue yourself from the trap of creating verbose slides that act more as eye charts than helpful aids. A useful visualization tool is Google Image search. Look up the idea or point you are trying to convey and see what comes up. Since many images have copyright issues, you are better served to use what you find as a starting point for your own creative ideas, rather than adding the exact images you find to your presentation.

Variety truly is the spice of life and memorable presentations. By varying your voice, evidence, movements, and slides, you help your audience to stay engaged and remember what you're saying.



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## 5. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

As a speaker, your job is to be in service of your audience. You need to be sure that you make it easy for them to understand your message. I am not suggesting you “dumb down” your content. Rather, I argue you should spend time to **make sure your content is relevant and easily accessible** to them. Relevance is based on empathy. You need to diagnose your audience's knowledge, expectations, and attitudes, and then tailor your content to their needs, particularly when presenting statistics.

Too often, presenters deliver numbers devoid of context, which makes it hard for the audience to see their relevance, much less remember them. As an example, I worked with an executive at a global financial institution who presented an astonishingly large number when referring to how much money went through his firm's

banks everyday. Unfortunately, the number was too large for me to grasp and remember. To facilitate comprehension and memory, we determined that he should relate that the amount of money going through his firm's banks was equivalent to 25% of the world's money each day. With this context, his number suddenly became much more relevant to my understanding, and more impactful. Clearly, context matters. By making it relevant, you make it memorable.

Another way to make things relevant is to connect your content with information your audience already knows. **Analogies** are a perfect tool for this. By comparing new information to something your audience is already familiar with, analogies activate the audience's existing mental constructs, which allows for quicker information processing and understanding.

For example, when I teach the purpose and value of organizing a presentation, I often say that a presenter's job is to be a tour guide. We then discuss the most important tour guide imperative: "Never lose the members of your tour group!" This analogy allows my students to leverage all of their experiences of being on tours to understand not only the importance of organizing a presentation, but other ideas, as well, such as setting expectations, checking in with audience members, transitioning between ideas, etc.

By focusing on your audience's perspective and making your content relevant to them, you help them more easily understand your points, and remember those points, too.



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## 6. GIVE YOUR AUDIENCE A REASON TO CARE

Most of us can quickly recall where we were on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, yet far fewer of us can remember our whereabouts on Monday, September 10, 2001. The emotional toll of the terrifying and tragic 9/11 terrorist attacks demonstrates a truism that has been known since the ancient Greeks studied rhetoric: **Emotion sticks**. People remember emotionally charged messages much more readily than fact-based ones. In fact, modern scientists are finding that our emotional responses have a fast track to our long-term memory. So when possible, try to bring some emotion into your presentation, whether in the form of your delivery or the content

itself. This emotion will bolster engagement in the moment and memory in the future

To help your audience remember your message, work to **have your tone and delivery match the emotional impact you desire**. You must take time to reflect on the emotional response you want and then work to make sure that your delivery is congruent with the emotional impact you desire. However, be careful not to be too scripted or theatrical. For emotion to help you, it must be authentic and credible.

I am often challenged when I assert that emotion is an important ingredient for engagement and memory. My technical and scientific clients and students claim that their presentations need to be highly detailed and descriptive, and, thus, emotion is antithetical and incompatible to their speaking goals. I fully believe that even the most technical and scientific talks can have emotion infused in them. Further, I have seen firsthand how emotion can elevate the involvement, impact, and memory of these types of presentations. The best way to bring emotion in is to **focus on benefits and implications** of the technology or science. Benefits are inherently emotional....saving time, saving money, saving trees, saving lives...these are emotional. I recently worked with a large graphics chip maker whose standard presentations are jammed full of technical detail, jargon, and data. These presentations lead to what one of my former students termed "verbal anesthesia." Audience members were overwhelmed with the presenters' information and underwhelmed in their comprehension and retention. However, once the presenters focused on the benefits of the graphics chips to the audience's lives, such as powering their mobile devices, car navigation systems, etc., the presentations had more impact. By including an emotional component to your presentations via your tone, delivery, and connection to your audience, you can expedite engagement and increase long-term retention.



## FROM NOW ON...

*By invoking specific techniques and practices, you can deliver a presentation that is memorable for both you and your audience, no matter your presentation environment or topic. To help you remember your presentation, focus on your preparation, message structure, and practice. To aid your audience in remembering your presentation, tend to your message's relevance, variation, and emotion. When combined together, **these tools will lead to confident, compelling, and connected presentations.***

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## ABOUT MATT ABRAHAMS

Matt Abrahams is a passionate, collaborative and innovative educator and coach who teaches Strategic Communication for Stanford University's Graduate School of Business and Presentation Skills for Stanford's Continuing Studies Program, while also teaching at De Anza College. He has published research articles on cognitive planning, persuasion, and interpersonal communication. Matt recently published the second edition of *Speaking Up Without Freaking Out*, a book written to help the millions of people who suffer from anxiety around speaking in public. Additionally, Matt developed an iPad app called eValue8 that provides instant, proscriptive feedback to presenters. Matt also curates NoFreakingSpeaking.com to help those looking to be confident presenters.

Matt is Co-Founder of Bold Echo Communication Solutions, a presentation and communication skills company that helps people improve their presentation skills. Matt has worked with executives to help prepare and present keynote addresses, IPO road shows, conduct media interviews, and deliver TED talks.