

---

# SPEAK EASIER

---

presentation and public speaking skills



by Richard Uridge in association with Museums of Cheshire Volunteer Training Programme

---

## CONTENTS

---

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>PURPOSE .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<i>What are you “selling?” .....</i>	<i>6</i>
EXERCISE .....	7
<b>Two .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>AUDIENCE.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Who are you “selling” to? .....</i>	<i>8</i>
EXAMPLE.....	9
EXERCISE .....	9
<b>Three.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>CONTEXT.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>Where are you “selling?” .....</i>	<i>11</i>
<b>Four.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>CONTENT .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>What you tell them. ....</i>	<i>14</i>
A FINAL WORD ON CONTENT.....	17
NRCT OWD NON NAFAL ONET .....	17
<b>Five.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>STRUCTURE .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<i>The order you tell them.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<b>Six .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>STYLE.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<i>The way you tell them .....</i>	<i>20</i>
<b>Seven.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>SPEAK OUT LOUD .....</b>	<b>26</b>

<i>Why talking to yourself is a good idea .....</i>	<i>26</i>
Nine.....	27
<b>A CALL TO ACTION.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<i>Promotional techniques .....</i>	<i>27</i>
Repetition .....	28
Tagging .....	28
Story telling .....	29
Primacy and latency .....	29
Catchphrases .....	30
Hooks .....	30
Ten.....	31
<b>NERVES .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<i>Butterflies are beautiful .....</i>	<i>31</i>
Say hello to your nerves.....	32
Make a plan .....	32
Practice makes perfect.....	33
Grow your confidence from a solid start.....	33
Breath deeply.....	33
Speak slowly .....	33
Focus on success.....	34
Feed off the audience .....	34
Admit nothing.....	35
Share the load .....	35

# Introduction

Giving a presentation fills most of us with dread. Even the thought of standing up in front of a few colleagues can turn our legs to jelly. So the prospect of speaking to an audience of hundreds can render normally calm and coherent individuals into gibbering, nervous wrecks.

It doesn't need to be this way. Say hello to your nerves. Embrace them and turn the energy they bring into something productive rather than destructive. Let that energy stir your creative juices and make your next presentation extraordinary instead of ordinary. Memorable instead of forgettable. Enjoyable instead of tolerable (for you *and* the audience). But, most important of all, effective instead of ineffective.

The following course notes are designed to be read in conjunction with our presentation and public speaking workshop(s) and are intended for those who've already attended a training session. Broadly speaking they follow the same six step plan that your trainer covered on the day with corresponding chapters plus additional examples and extra information. The six steps are:

1. Purpose - what you want your presentation to achieve.
2. Audience - who you need to achieve it with.
3. Context - the physical and intellectual "space" you and your audience are in.
4. Content - what you need to tell the audience.
5. Structure - the order you tell them.
6. Style - the way you tell 'em.
7. Success - yes, yet another word beginning with s but this is what you should achieve if you follow the preceding steps!

Download these notes. Please note you will need to enter the password emailed to you when you joined the member-only side of the ACM Training website.

Receive email notification of updates.

**COMING SOON...**

No time to read these notes? Then why not download them as an audio file or subscribe to our presentation skills podcast?

## About the author

Richard's fascination with the business of presenting can be traced back to an unfortunate incident involving a toilet window and a bed of nettles. Spectacularly misjudging an after dinner speech he'd been asked to give to a group of conservative farmers (and spectacularly misjudging the strength of the complimentary wine), he decided leaving through the window during a drinks break was a safer option than ploughing on. And so it would have been but for the stingers lurking the other side of the frosted glass.

He learned from his mistake (research the audience, don't drink, always carry a pair of leather gardening gloves) but never quite escaped his rural roots and went on to present programmes such as *Farming Today* and *Open Country* on BBC Radio 4. His audiences as a broadcaster regularly topped the million mark although he'd be first to concede that a live presentation to an audience a fraction of that size is way more nerve-wracking when they are in the same room.



Richard has been passionate about communication - and words in particular - since he landed a job as a cub reporter on the *Reading Chronicle* in the days of inky-ribboned typewriters and hot metal printing presses. He writes about it at [blog.acmtraining.co.uk](http://blog.acmtraining.co.uk). And he stands up and talks about it at every opportunity, chairing conferences, giving speeches and, of course, delivering training.

One

# PURPOSE

## *What are you “selling?”*

I find it useful to remember everyone lives by selling something.

Robert Louis Stevenson

I spent three years of my life building a house. Digging holes. Pouring concrete. Mixing mortar. Laying bricks. Cutting wood. Boarding walls. Tiling roofs. Plumbing. Wiring. Painting...The only thing I didn't do was the plastering because it's the only trade that gets harder the slower you do it. But that's beside the point. To build a house you need a plan. Only then are you in a position to decide which tools you need. You don't just go to Screwfix, buy a hammer and start bashing things with it.

So what's my point? Well, too many of us start our presentations in a similar fashion. We don't draw up a plan and we grab the nearest available tool - usually PowerPoint. And, if you'll allow me to push this metaphor to breaking point, our whole presentation crashes around our ears. Or rather the audience's ears. So close that document, step away from the computer and think.

What do you want your presentation to achieve? I ask a similar question of delegates on my written word workshops. Hearing your words (rather than reading them) what do you want your listeners to do? How do you want them to act? Don't tell me you want to inform them. It's just not good enough. Information is a means to an end not the end itself. You want to inform your audience so that they: buy your product or service; invest in your company; sign off on your proposal; give you pay rise; promote you to the board; support your charity; smoke less; eat more fruit; drink less; exercise more...

In other words what are you selling? And if you're from the Third Sector don't be alarmed by my use of an apparently commercial word like selling. We're all selling something. Politicians walking the boards in the theatre of Westminster are selling us their particular brand of politics. Pop stars their music. Sportspeople their sport (and, increasingly, their merchandise). Charities encouraging us to give money or time are selling both a salve for our consciences and the prospect of a better, fairer world. If you still don't like the word, think of your presentation as increasing social rather than financial capital.

But whichever way you prefer to look at it, make sure you know exactly what you want your presentation to achieve. Ideally, crystallise your thoughts into one, or two or, at the very most, three pithy bullet points jotted on a note that you can stick somewhere in clear view so you never lose sight of where you're heading as you build your presentation on these, dare I say it, solid foundations.

## EXERCISE

Grab a sheet of paper or, if you're fabulously wealthy, a block of eye-wateringly expensive PostIt notes. Looking forward to your next presentation or back to a previous one, complete the following sentences:

*By the end of the presentation I want my audience to...*

### TIP

---

If you're struggling to complete this exercise or haven't yet given a presentation so haven't got anything to reflect on it might help to use the following example. You work for an NGO (non government organisation) whose job it is to reduce the amount of plastic that ends up polluting the world's oceans. You've been asked to give a talk to a group of secondary school children.

Your sentence might initially read something like this:

*By the end of the presentation I want my audience to understand the damage that plastic can cause to the environment.*

But I'd argue that understanding is a means to an end not the end in and of itself. Think about it. What you really want is for that understanding to lead to an actual behavioural change. So re-write that sentence and it'll probably end up reading something like this:

*By the end of the presentation I want my audience to reduce the amount of plastic they use in the first place, re-use the plastic they can't avoid or make sure it's properly recycled.*

Now look at what you've just written and underline the key words. Limit yourself to two or three - four or five at the most. The sentence will then morph into something like this:

*By the end of the presentation I want my audience to reduce the amount of plastic they use in the first place, and re-use or recycle what's left.*

Remember information is a means to an end, not the end itself. Information is passive. Reducing, re-using and recycling are active. Use information to activate your audience!

Two

# AUDIENCE

## *Who are you “selling” to?*

Know thine audience

So now you know what you want your presentation to achieve the next step is to think carefully about who you have to achieve it with - the audience. Why? Because if your presentation doesn't work for them it won't work for you. Sounds obvious doesn't it? Even so, it's surprising how many presentations I sit through that are either mind-blowingly complicated or mind-numbingly simple. That use words or expressions I'm not familiar with. That send me to sleep. Or bore me to death.

The big brands that sell us stuff by the lorry load - Pepsi, Coca Cola, Tesco, Sainsbury's - spend a fortune on audience research so that they can use the insight it gives them to sell us even more stuff. And the main reason that the new super brands like Facebook and Google are making a small fortune (actually make that a large fortune) is down to the data they hold on us users - information that we give away every time we visit a webpage or give something the thumbs up. You need to know the people you're “selling” to in the same way. Don't worry. It doesn't need to cost a fortune. You don't need to engage the services of an expensive market research firm. Audience research is something you can do before, and even during, a presentation by investing a modest amount of time and asking some simple questions.

There's a list of questions you should be asking at the end of this chapter. It's by no means exhaustive. More a starter list to get you thinking of your own and adding to it. But before you scroll, swipe or skip to the list remember the most crucial question of all is this:

*What does the audience need to know in order to “buy” what I’m “selling” and how much of that do they know already?*

If you know the answer to this two part question you simply subtract part two from part one and what's left is, in simple terms, what you need to tell them. In other words the content.

All the other questions are likely to guide *how* you tell them. Things like the vocabulary you use, the tone you adopt, the evidence you provide and the stories you tell. If you already know your audience quite well or they're people like you then you may be able to answer the questions yourself. If not then ask them. Ideally they should be members of the actual audience. But if that's not possible (because, for example, you don't know who's going to be in the audience beforehand) then ask people who are similar to those you're



expecting. Alternatively, or additionally, you can do your audience research right up to the last minute. At conferences, judge audiences by observing their behaviour during earlier presentations (unless, of course, you're the first speaker). Are they animated? Getting involved? Clapping? Cheering? Booing? Or are they passive? Half asleep? Mingle with the audience and quiz them during the breaks. These two activities will also provide you with a far better alternative to sitting nervously fretting about your own speech. If you've planned and rehearsed properly there's nothing else to do. And if you haven't then it's too late anyway so you may as well enjoy the coffee and the chat!

You can even make audience research a part of your presentation. Open with a question. The answer you get might guide which of several carefully considered directions you take. And it has the added virtue of being interactive (see later) which is a great way of keeping an audience on its proverbial toes.

## EXAMPLE

Imagine you're from Sustrans, a charity whose mission is to get us to use more sustainable forms of transport such as bicycles. You could begin your presentation by asking the audience on a show of hands the following questions:

- Who drove here today?
- Who walked?
- Who cycled?
- Who came by public transport?
- Of those who came by public transport who came by train or tube?
- By bus or tram?

Better still get people standing up and moving around into groups depending on their answers to these questions. The audience then become a real-life pie chart which helps you explain both visually and interactively what proportion of us already use sustainable forms of transport. So much better than a PowerPoint pie chart!

## EXERCISE

Draw a pen portrait of an individual who represents the audience. If the audience is diverse choose two or three individuals who represent different sections of that audience and draw up pen portraits of each. Give them a name. Talk to them.

## AUDIENCE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

---

- Who's in the audience?
- What are they like? Young, old, rich, poor, men, women?
- What do they like? Tastes, interests, hobbies?
- What's your relationship with them? Do they love you or hate you?
- Are they homogenous or heterogenous? Do they all hate you or only some?
- What do they think not just about you but the organisation you represent? They may love you but hate your company.
- How likely are they to buy what you're selling? Are they sceptical or sold?
- How far have you got to move them?
- Are they conscripts or volunteers? How attentive are they? Are they hungry. Tired?
- How much money have they got? How easy is it going to be to part them with this money?
- What do they already know? You don't want to bore them by telling them what they already know well but equally you don't want to leave out something without which they are unlikely to do as you ask.

Three

# CONTEXT

## *Where are you “selling?”*

The auditorium, the platform, the stage...they're your shop floor.

If you're “selling” something as a speaker to an audience of potential “buyers” it's well worth considering what might influence those buyers in their purchasing decisions. What barriers to communication are there that might get in the way of the deal? Those barriers could be physical: for example, the venue is so big that the people in the cheap seats at the back of the auditorium simply can't see or hear you properly. Or they could be what I call intellectual - or mental - barriers that spring from the minds of the audience: for example, they might be old men and you might be a young woman and they discount or distrust what you say because they're asking themselves: “what does *she* know about this, she's barely out of college?”

Sometimes the barriers might arise from a combination of the two: for example the auditorium may be too hot or cold (physical) and the audience may be more concerned with their physiological discomfort than they are with what you're saying. So they become distracted or inattentive. If Maslow's hierarchy of needs is to be believed then we're incapable of higher level thinking if we're literally sweating (or shivering) the small but significant stuff.

Whatever the cause, it's your job as a savvy presenter to anticipate the barriers and to design them out of your presentation or, where that's not possible, find a way of helping you and the audience get over, under or around them.

The audience research you did (see the preceding chapter) should have identified many of the potential intellectual barriers to communication. Let's say, for example, that you're from a local authority which has just accidentally double-dipped the audience's bank accounts for twice their usual monthly council tax instalments because of a software upgrade glitch. You can reckon on having a tougher time than you would if you were from a charity selling kittens. Or maybe the mental barriers spring instead from some deeper-rooted prejudices like ageism, sexism or racism. Your audience is old, male and white. You are young, female and black. How do you deal with these often subconscious reputational issues that would otherwise threaten to derail your presentation? Ignore them and they might get in the way like the proverbial elephant in the room. Yet if we confront them head on they might become bigger barriers than they really were.

There are, of course, no prescriptive answers to these challenging concerns. You have to consider what's right on balance. Sometimes it's best (mixing metaphors hopelessly) to grab the bull (elephant?!) by the horns: *“I know what you're thinking. What does this girl know about the construction industry? Well perhaps not as much as you do having worked in it for many years.*

*But what I do know is x, y, z. And over the next 10 minutes I'm going to show you how this knowledge can transform the way you do business. So hard hats on and preconceived notions about women in construction off..."*

Thankfully the physical barriers to communication are easier to deal with. Not least because they're in the open for all to see - or hear - rather than hidden in people's heads. I'd encourage you to conduct what I call a venue audit well before your presentation so you can sort out all of the potential problems well in advance, rather than discover them too late to do anything about them. Take the hoary old issue of IT failure as a classic example. The slides you prepared on a Mac won't talk to the venue's PC-based system. The projector you brought with you blows its bulb at the crucial moment and you didn't bring a spare. Or the room you're speaking in is too bright for your slides to show because you didn't get enough lumens or whatever it was the bloke in Office Universe was trying to tell you about when you were selecting which model to buy. All three examples are simply solved: a dongle with both Mac and PC versions of your presentation; a spare bulb (or an email in advance to book the venue's own projector if yours goes pop); an "old school" version of your slides on a flipchart pad (great for when a digger driver accidentally cuts the power supply to the whole building as I discovered on a speaking engagement in Bristol).

If you can't visit the actual venue beforehand at the very least you should be walking through a virtual version in your head by asking the venue staff to send you floor plans, layouts, dimensions and photographs. If the auditorium is huge but the audience is small then you may be able to get away without using a microphone. But if you do need a microphone is it handheld or wireless? And if it's handheld can you deliver your presentation one-handed? Have you practised using a microphone or will you hold it too close and boom and pop or too far away and sound like you're speaking from an echoey toilet? Many a presentation has been ruined by a cheap PA system. Or a good one used badly. Ideally do a technical rehearsal with the actual gear in the actual venue with the actual technicians. That's a lot of actuals I realise but better than coming an actual cropper.

Here's a list of some of the things that have gone wrong either with my own presentations or with those of people who've attended our presentation and public speaking workshops. Alongside I've added a solution or two. It's by no means a definitive list of potential problems and possible solutions. Just something to get you thinking about what could go wrong with your next gig, stop it happening and spare yourself the embarrassment. And remember no detail is too small. I was chairing an international conference at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London which required two big television screens to be set up either side of the podium. The dress rehearsal went without a hitch (always a bad sign)! What I hadn't anticipated but should have done is that by the time of the actual presentation the clouds outside (yes *outside* the venue) could have cleared and the sun would then shine through one of the ceiling height un-curtained windows rendering the TV screens un-viewable. A compass, a weather forecast, a ladder (plus a working at heights risk assessment) and some black out paper and sticky tape could have saved the day. But they didn't because I failed to do a thorough-enough venue audit.

## PRESENTATIONAL PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

PROBLEM	SOLUTION
<b>Audience or presenter drunk</b>	Stay sober. Make your presentation as simple and as short as possible. Negotiate an earlier slot before the audience has consumed too much warm complimentary Liebfraumilch.
<b>Screens not visible because of ambient light</b>	Change position of screens, pull curtains or blinds, arrange for lights to be dipped. Use a more powerful projector (the higher the number of lumens the brighter the image).
<b>People can't hear properly</b>	Change the layout to bring the audience closer. Use a public address system. Speak more loudly, enunciate your words more carefully and slow down.
<b>People can't see properly</b>	Change the layout. Block off seats where the view is obscured by fixtures and fittings. If it's a really big venue think about installing big screens and using video cameras to literally zoom in on the action.
<b>Audience inattentive</b>	Is it because they're distracted by physiological needs? Change the room temperature. Give them an excuse as a part of your presentation to get up and move around. They'll thank you for preventing deep vein thrombosis.
<b>Audience too rowdy</b>	Give them a chance to relax. Have an additional, un-scheduled break. Give people a chance to chill. Find out what the cause of the rowdiness is.
<b>Hecklers</b>	See my ten point plan for dealing with them in <a href="#">this blog post</a> - one of many on presentation skills and a good reason to subscribe to the ACM Training blog!
<b>Equipment failure</b>	"What can go wrong will go wrong" was the mantra of the original <a href="#">crash test dummy John Stapp</a> . It kept him alive in dozens of death-defying stunts. Equipment failure during a presentation is unlikely to be fatal but the embarrassment can feel pretty wretched so have a Plan B. In practice that means things like bringing a rolled up flipchart pad with the hand-drawn version of your slides.
<b>Presenter failure</b>	Follow the instruction in this guide and it shouldn't happen. But if it does...sleep on it, put things into perspective. Nobody died, it just felt that way. There's always next time and remember practice makes perfect.

Four

# CONTENT

*What you tell them.*

Content is king

I may have relegated content to chapter four but that doesn't mean it isn't important. Content is king. Without it that TV in your living room is, in effect, just an empty box (or a *crystal bucket* as the Australian writer and broadcaster, Clive James, had it). Without it newspapers are just so many blank sheets; websites blank screens. And without it presentations aren't worth attending.

But you can only be in a position to tell what content is required if you've followed the preceding steps. Start gathering the content - words, pictures, information, data - before you've thought about what you want to achieve (purpose), who you want to achieve it with (audience), and where you're going to achieve it (context) and you risk having too much stuff. And the world already has way too much stuff without you adding to the heap.

Speaking of heaps, go through each piece of potential content bit by bit, line by line, picture by picture, anecdote by anecdote. If it's information that the audience absolutely needs to know in order for them to behave the way you want them to behave then keep it. If it's information that the audience really doesn't need to know then bin it. And then go through what's left and if the audience already knows it, then - you've got the idea by now - bin it. After all, why bother telling people what they already know? It wastes their time or insults their intelligence. Or, worse still, both!

I accept that I might be insulting *your* intelligence with this overly simplistic approach that treats the audience as one, where in reality the audience is comprised of many individuals with different levels of knowledge. Let's think of an example. Say you're presenting to 10 work colleagues about your plan to boost sales. Five of them already know that sales in the first quarter have fallen by 25%. But five of them don't and for their sake you can't not mention this crucial contextual information. So it becomes a case of *how* you tell those who don't know without boring or insulting those who do. Practically speaking it may sound something like this:

"I know that some of you are well aware of the drop in sales that we've experienced but it's really important information so forgive me for recapping...."

Or like this: "Who knows what sales are looking like in the first quarter?" And when Bob in sales answers asking him to explain to the don't knows what this means - in other words recruiting the knows to tell the don't knows on your behalf and giving them something active to do rather than being passive listeners.

The next step is to determine the best *medium* for the information you need to share. By medium I mean is the information best shared with the audience through the *spoken word* - probably the biggest part of most presentations? And, if so, whose word - yours or a third party (for example, a client or service user)? Or is it better to share the information visually - through the *written word* or *pictorially* with an image (on a PowerPoint slide maybe)?

Sometimes a point is so important it's worth making simultaneously or consecutively in two or more ways. But if you're going to make the same general point via different media then usually it's worth making sure that they compliment one another. Think of the slide as a layer of understanding that adds value to your words rather than simply parroting them. Wow! So you can read. We've all been to *those* presentations. And really wish we hadn't!

You (spoken word): "There's been an alarming drop in sales" You don't need to say by how much and over what period because that's on the slide (below).

PowerPoint (written word):



This slide, I'd argue is easy to understand. It contains just three bits of information. It's about sales. They're down 25%. And in the three months from January to March. The next slide may appear prettier but needs more time to decode. Don't be tempted to fall for style over substance .



PowerPoint (image):



A really good way of assembling just the right amount of content - not too much and not too little, a kind of presentational Goldilocks zone - is to draw up a matrix. It's a technique that we devised for our media training workshops but applies pretty much to any communication situation, presentations included.

The Matrix sounds kind of grand and maybe conjures up images of Keanu Reeves catching speeding bullets in the 1999 movie of the same name. But the ACM Training matrix is nothing more than a piece of paper divided into three columns.

As you can see the first column is for your presentation key messages. Try to limit yourself to three or four. Using a similar example to the one above if you were from a charity that was experiencing a drop in donations your keys messages might read something like this:

1. Donations are down.
2. We need to take action to boost them.
3. If we don't our service users will suffer



#### 4. And, ultimately, so will we.

But if you think about key messages they're simply you asserting something. And unless you are highly revered and can draw on a source of something called reverential power then you're audience won't necessarily believe you. They want hard facts. So column two of the matrix is where you capture the facts and figures that evidence your key messages. Be disciplined and choose the best three or four facts. Too many and you'll overload your audience with information. Too few and you risk providing insufficient evidence.

But not everybody is persuaded by cold, hard facts. Some prefer what they might call by comparison soft, warm stories. People who are led not by their heads but by their hearts. And column three of the matrix is for them. Where you jot down the story or stories you could tell that help you illustrate your point, in a human way.

In reality, most people prefer a mixed approach: the clarity that comes from the explicit key messages in column one; the intellectually persuasive evidence that comes from column two; and the emotionally engaging illustration that comes from column three.

Don't worry if your matrix is messy, has loads of crossing out and goes through several different versions. Putting stuff down on paper is a great way of clearing your mind. And clarity of thought is essential if you're going design and deliver a presentation that the audience can actually follow, understand, act upon and, yes, even enjoy.

## A FINAL WORD ON CONTENT

Don't think that once you've finished your matrix that's it - you can simply share the contents with your audience and job done. It isn't. Content is all very well but without *structure* it's meaningless. Look at it this way. The subheading of this paragraph is comprised of five words. Or 23 characters (letters and spaces). Change the order - the structure - and it becomes nigh on impossible to understand.

NRCT OWD NON NAFAL ONET

Five

# STRUCTURE

*The order you tell them.*

“You’ve got seconds to grab your audience’s attention and only minutes to keep it.” - John Medina

Nrct owd non nafal onet...

In the same way that cooking renders the unpalatable palatable so structure renders the unfathomable fathomable. Whilst we’re in the kitchen, think of the preceding chapter on content as the selecting the very best *ingredients* and this one on structure as devising the perfect *recipe*. A bit like soufflés presentations without both are likely to fall flat (or not even rise in the first place).

Now I’m not going to pick an argument with the ancients (Greeks that is) who devised the earliest structural template - the Three Act play. It has, after all, stood the test of time. But what I am arguing is that presenters put the wrong things in Act One (the beginning) and the wrong things in Act Two (the middle) and the wrong things in Act Three (the end). Too often we follow a slavish linear or chronological approach (learned as impressionable youngsters when were writing up science experiments at school - first we did this, then we did that and then we observed the other). If a similar approach was taken by novelists and film makers we wouldn’t spend small fortune on paperbacks or sit up half the night watching Netflix box sets. No, they know how to grab our attention and make their books unputdownable and their tv series unlookawayfromable. The purpose of this chapter is to show you how to make your presentation equally compelling.

The red line on the following graph shows what happens to an audience over time during what might loosely be called a standard presentation. They start out being quite attentive (probably not 100% attentive - we’re all a little distracted one way or another). But even after the first minute their attentiveness begins to drop. And the longer we go on the faster it drops. Until their attention hits zero which means they’re either asleep, have left the building or are fiddling with their phones - all of which are bad news for you.

So savvy speakers structure their presentations in such a way that they lift that attentiveness line as close as possible to 100% at the start and each and every time it threatens to drop do something that recaptures the attention of those who are beginning to nod off. The green line on the graph is much healthier.

So what is this magic *something* that keeps audiences engaged throughout a presentation?



Good question! In a good book or film our attention is grabbed by some kind of dramatic device right at the outset to such an extent that we want to know what happens next. And if at any point they reckon our attention maybe waning they introduce a new twist or turn in the plot to grab us all over again. All of which means you need to think of your presentation as a story or a series of stories and yourself as a story teller. Look at that planning matrix I was talking out in the previous chapter. Is there something in column three that you could zoom in on that would give you a great big hook? And does that story in the telling have lots of little hooks to keep people interested throughout? The best stories do.

If you're interested in learning more about the concept of zooming in on a detail to give your presentations a lift you can check out my [Five Minute Masterclass on the subject](#).

As John Medina said in the quote at the beginning of this chapter you've got seconds to grab your audience's attention and only minutes to keep it.

# STYLE

## *The way you tell them*

Style is one of those things that's more noticeable in its absence

We've all got them - annoying friends or colleagues who look effortlessly cool even in a pair of old jeans and a t shirt. We also know people who, however hard they try, look naff in a suit. Hell, those people may even be us!

And so it is with presenters and public speakers. Some appear effortlessly stylish. Others manage to make otherwise great material dull. But what constitutes presentational style? It's a combination of factors which fit under three main headings:

1. Verbal - the *actual* words you speak.
2. Para-verbal - the *way* you say the words - things like tone, pace and volume.
3. Non-verbal - everything but the words including the way you look, how you move and where you stand.

### Verbal

---

Heard of Albert Mehrabian? Probably not. But you'll almost certainly have heard his work quoted or, more likely, misquoted: that 55% of face-to-face human communication is non-verbal; 38% is para-verbal (that is, to do with the tone and volume); and that only 7% of meaning is derived from the actual words spoken.

There was nothing wrong with the UCLA professor's original research back in the 1970s. His sample was small and the circumstances narrowly defined. But that didn't stop the media misinterpreting the results and Mehrabian's work has been misrepresented ever since. [Have a look at this article if you're interested.](#)

The fact is that as a presenter words are your principle tool for communicating. And whilst I have no empirical evidence to quote, I'd hazard a guess that in most presentations your words account for nearer 93% of meaning than the remaining seven. If so, then the words you speak are important. The words you choose are important. The way you put those words together is important. In short words are important.

Let's look at word choice first. One of the many wonderful things about English is it's diverse heritage. Migrants from what is now Germany and the Netherlands brought their West Germanic language here (the UK) between the 5th and 7th centuries. Their tongues (and therefore tongue) intermingled with the North Germanic speaking Scandinavians who arrived in the 8th and 9th

centuries. There was even more intermarriage - literally and linguistically - with the French-speaking Normans who came along post 1066 and all that. And the language continues to evolve to this day with words like bungalow and pyjamas borrowed from far and wide. English owes its success to its flexibility.

What does that mean in practical terms for you as a speaker? It means that you've got a dazzling array of alternatives to choose from. Think of a great speaker like Winston Churchill for a moment. The wartime Prime Minister is said to have chosen almost exclusively "olde English" words in his beached speech because, he felt, they'd stir the British bulldog spirit more effectively than the Onion Johnny-come-lately Norman French words. He chose fight instead of battle. The only post conquest word he used - perhaps deliberately for effect - was surrender.

So when you choose your words make sure you choose words that most effectively convey your meaning.

Think about words more deeply for just a moment. Take the word "cat." Written it's an arbitrary squiggle that reaches our eyes from a screen or page. Spoken it's an arbitrary sound that reaches our ears from the speaker's mouth. In both cases the word is decoded by our brains and turned back into the animal that the word represents. Cat is a good word in that it readily conjures up the mental images and sounds of the fur, blood and claws reality. But take words like "stakeholder" and "policy" - both words I hear too frequently being used in presentations. What images, if any, do they conjure up?

Engage your stakeholders by using image rich words. Make it your policy. With 171,000 plus words to choose from there really can be no excuse for using weak, ineffectual ones. You're spoiled for choice.

Riff on familiar phrases. They have the virtue of sounding familiar and being catchy without being overly familiar and cliched. Let me give you an example. I was working with a local authority which was struggling to "sell" its local plan which involved building some homes on the greenbelt. The council's opponents had commandeered the well worn catchphrase "going, going, gone" and were winning the argument. So the councillors, I advised, needed a similarly pithy retort. They came up with "here to stay, here tomorrow" - an unusual, surprising and, I'd suggest, effective re-working of the phrase "here today gone tomorrow."

## Para-verbal

---

We've all been to presentations where the words are delivered in a voice that washes over us and, before too long, sends us to sleep, if not literally then metaphorically.

*"Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah..."*

*“Blah, blah, blah...”*

*“Blah, blah blah.”*

If this happened at a concert and all the instruments were playing the same note at the same pace you'd want your money back. So why should presentations be any different? They are, after all, performances of sorts. The short answer is they shouldn't !

Para verbal means to do with the words but not the actual meaning. Take that simple word cat again. You can say CAT loudly, dare I say it, with a roar. You can say it quietly, with a purr. You can say it slowly C-A-T. Or quickly. Hard or soft. And you can pause (or even paws) for effect at the end of the word to let it (or the claws/clause) sink in...

I like to think of the tone, pace and volume of a presentation as it's musicology. The human voice is a musical instrument. So play it like one.

## MUSICOLOGY

In practical terms this means having fast sections - allegro. And slower more reflective sections - adagio. It means being aware of the overall rhythm or tempo of your presentation. If it's all fast it can be hard for the audience to take stuff in. But if it's all slow the audience can get frustrated that you're labouring point they've already got.

It can be difficult to change our natural pace of delivery - old habits die hard. But one way to at least give the impression of speaking more slowly is to increase the length of our full stops and paragraph ends by counting to three in our head before moving on (one thousand, two thousand, three thousand).

Pausing for effect is a well-known but under utilised presentational skill (one thousand, two thousand, three thousand).

It serves to reinforce the point made immediately prior to the pause (one thousand, two thousand, three thousand).

If you think you have a shrill voice you could try lowering it a bit. I appreciate this is easy to say and hard to do. Famously the former British Prime Minister Mrs Thatcher lowered her voice to give her more gravitas. I found this article useful <http://www.myvoiceexercises.com/exercises-for-a-deeper-voice/>

Easier to achieve are quieter bits - pianissimo. And louder sections - fortissimo. It's counter intuitive but if you want an audience to hear what you're saying say it more quietly so that they're forced to listen more carefully. Whisper it even.

Be sure your presentation is well orchestrated. That might mean introducing a new instrument if the audience is getting bored listening to your voice. A double or even triple-headed presentation may need more people to deliver but each new presenter/instrument gets refreshed and renewed attention from the audience.



It's also worth considering how you can score your presentation so that it builds to a crescendo (or a series of them). In short be a maestro. Aim for a bravura performance.

## Non verbal

---

We've already established that you wouldn't go to a concert where the orchestra played the same note throughout. Well, by the same token you wouldn't attend a ballet where the prima ballerina stayed rooted to the same spot throughout.

In ballet, beauty springs from movement and choreographers think long and hard about how dancers use the full extent of the stage, where they position themselves in relation to one another and the audience and which steps to take - a *pas de deux* maybe or a *pas de chat*.

And so it should be in presentations, with speakers giving similar consideration to the choreography of *their* performances. Now I'm not suggesting for one minute that this means pulling on a pink tutu and sashaying across the boardroom floor but simply injecting some more modest, naturalistic movement into your presentation in a way that compliments your words - energises them even - rather than detracts from them.

## CHOREOGRAPHY

Too many presenters I've seen (or rather haven't) stay hidden behind the lectern throughout. And those who do show us their legs often pace nervously up and down an imaginary track and I end up worrying more about the carpet than I do listening to what's being said.



I get why presenters stay close to the lectern. It's where their notes are and, looking out at the sea of faces that is the audience, they fret that if they swim too far from this presentational lifebelt they'll end up drowning. Trouble is that, in a big auditorium in particular, the lectern is usually stage left or right which means you're closer to one side of the audience than the other. And while the extra distance between you and those opposite may not be an obvious distraction, subconsciously at least, it may leave those farthest away feeling somehow left out.

A lectern house left (stage right) is a long way from the audience sitting diametrically opposite in the back rows.

### MIND THE GAP

And so it is with the people in the cheap seats at the back, again, of the bigger venues. They can feel ignored if you don't do something to literally or metaphorically close the gap between you and them. Literally closing the gap might mean coming down off the stage (with a radio microphone if the event is that big), walking along the aisle to the back of the auditorium and delivering a section of your talk from there. Metaphorical gap closers

include spoken ones - "can you hear me alright back there?" - and unspoken ones such as making eye contact with people in all quadrants of the audience, not just those closest to you. A really good tip I was given years ago is to divide the audience into quarters (or sixths in bigger venues), pick a friendly face in each section (front left, front right, middle left, middle right, etc.) and make eye contact with them periodically. Because of an optical property called parallax it appears as if you're looking at everybody in each section rather than just one.

## COME OUT COME OUT WHEREVER YOU ARE

Now in order to feel comfortable moving away from that lectern or desk and your notes means weaning yourself off those notes, more of which later. But before that let's explore the consequences of too much movement.

When our mind is racing our body often follows suit. So we pace up and down. And for the audience it can be a bit like watching a game of tennis where we're the ball and their eyes swivel from left to right and back again ad nauseam which, in Latin incidentally, means literally 'to sickness.' Remember audiences (and carpets for that matter) have feelings so don't overdo the movement. With practice it'll become instinctive. Just as the movement does for those ballerinas.

## FORM AND FUNCTION

If too much movement can be distracting, it follows that the right amount can be attracting. What we should aspire to then is movement that is meaningful. Meaningful because it grabs the audience's attention; gives people a chance to move around in their seats (and so prevents deep vein thrombosis); adds value to your words. By adding value I mean that your movement is actually making a point. Let me explain by giving a real life example.

A Third Sector presentation I recently helped choreograph was designed to get people to stop and think about the scourge of rough sleeping. The words went something like this...

*"You're walking down the street. It's like a minefield. You're navigating around other pedestrians who're paying more attention to their mobile phones than the pavement ahead. Picking a route that avoids the beggars who are up. And tip toeing past the rough sleepers who're down."*

Now these words could have been delivered statically from behind a lectern. But I'd argue they had twice the impact because they were delivered while the presenter was walking along an imaginary pavement, the actions mirroring the words.

## ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

If you want your audience to stop and think about the point you've just made, stop and think yourself. If you want your audience to take action, be active. If your presentation needs a moment of reflection, of quiet contemplation, then slow down and stop. If you're excited, look excited. And, of course, sound excited. Which brings me on to musicology, or how to use your voice as a musical instrument and play all the right notes in your next presentation.



## STAGE MANAGEMENT

One final thought in this presentation-as-a-performance category. How and even where you stage your presentation can make the difference between success and failure. Let me give you an example. I was working with a local authority that was struggling to win public support for a controversial plan to cut down a load of trees. Amongst many other things, I looked carefully at the way they were *staging* their public meetings. And that word staging is crucial because they had a traditional top table for the speakers (councillors and officers) that was positioned on an elevated platform above the audience. And perhaps sensibly so for sight lines.

However, this, I suggested, was subconsciously exacerbating the “us and them” feeling in the audience - that the local authority was somehow above them not just physically but also superior morally and intellectually. I suggested they reinforced the notion that councils serve the public (not vice versa) by putting the speakers on the same level or even below the audience - in the round as it were. Scary for the speakers I accept. But it had the required effect. Now I’m not suggesting for one minute that the public suddenly agreed to the plans - far from it - but the pent up anger subsided and the meetings were able to proceed in much more orderly fashion.

So think about where and how you’re staging your presentation. It may be much less controversial than tree felling but if the surroundings are sub-optimal in any way can you change the setting or the set in order to achieve the best possible results?

Tables, for example, give somewhere for an audience to hide their mobile phones. Take away the tables and you take away a potential distraction!

# SPEAK OUT LOUD

## *Why talking to yourself is a good idea*

It's not a sign of madness.

Right at the start I cautioned against opening up a PowerPoint, Word or similar document too soon. Well now I'm going to caution against doing it even now! Why? Because there are significant differences between the spoken and the written word and if we commit to screen or paper too soon words that are meant to be spoken we can end up with presentations that sound written. That sound somehow contrived. That contain words we rarely hear in conversation and are - ahem - discombobulating in the extreme.

Given that your presentation is probably going to be largely spoken and that the main speaker is probably going to be you try talking through your presentation. It's easier to do with a colleague listening and bouncing ideas off than it is on your own. But even alone it's a habit worth getting into.

For years I worked television and radio newsrooms. They were noisy places. Not because of the typewriters (although they were still very much a tool of the trade when I started) but because journalists talk to themselves. They write their stories out loud paragraph by paragraph. Only committing to the keyboard once they're happy with the sound of what they're saying. After all their scripts are written to be read out loud by a newsreader. And if they use an obtuse word or a clunky construction those same newsreaders shout at the scriptwriters.

So try it out on your next presentation. Speak it for as long as possible and write down what you hear yourself say.

# A CALL TO ACTION

## *Promotional techniques*

“If you have an important point to make, don't try to be subtle or clever. Use a pile driver. Hit the point once. Then come back and hit it again. Then hit it a third time - a tremendous whack.”

— Winston Churchill

You know what you're trying to sell but does your audience? Think about Churchill's famous We Shall Fight on the Beaches speech to the UK Parliament in June 1940. The purpose of that speech was to sell the country the prospect of a long and hard war against Nazi Germany. His matrix would have liked something like this:

KEY MESSAGES	FACTS AND FIGURES	NARRATIVE
We shall fight...	In France	Even though vast tracts of Europe have fallen we won't flag or fail.
	On the seas and oceans	
	With growing confidence and strength in the air	
	On the beaches	
	On the landing grounds	
	In the fields	
	In the streets	
	In the hills	
We shall defend our island	Whatever the cost	
	To the end	
We shall never surrender	Even if we're subjugated..	And if we fall the Empire beyond the seas guarded by the British fleet will carry on the struggle.
	...or starving.	

The word key word *fight* was mentioned not three but *seven* times in quick succession. Churchill

rammed it home with, to use his words from the quote at the beginning of this chapter, a pile driver. He gave it a tremendous whack.

So how can you ram home your key messages? Well, by using the same selling techniques that Churchill deployed and other, similar, promotional devices. Here are my top six:

1. Repetition
2. Tagging
3. Story telling
4. Primacy and latency (recency)
5. Catchphrases
6. Hooks

## *Repetition*

Churchill was a classically trained scholar and as such used rhetoric to make his points. There's something magical about the number three in persuading people to behave or act in a certain way. Tell them once and what you've told them barely registers. Tell them twice and a mental flag starts waving in their minds. "This must be important," they think to themselves without being sure. Tell them a third time and the must turns to an is. "This is very definitely is important," they're thinking. "(S)he's told me three times now!"

A word of warning. Repetition can be overdone. Just think Brexit means Brexit. How many times did you hear that in the aftermath of the vote to leave the EU? So use repetition in association with some or all of the following techniques...

## *Tagging*

You come bounding down the stairs on Christmas morning (assuming you don't live in a bungalow and that you celebrate Christmas) excited by the prospect of all the presents that Santa and his little helpers have left under the tree in the night. Particularly excited because some of the presents are for you. But how do you know which presents are yours? Because they have tags or labels attached which, in my case, reads something like "Dear Richard, Happy Xmas! Love Santa xxx."

So to help an audience differentiate your key messages from all of the things you say tag or label them. Not with a literal tag, of course, but a verbal tag. The tag can be a preface to the key message, a postscript, sandwiched somewhere in the middle or, potentially, all three.

"The key message in this chapter is that without promotional techniques your key messages may be missed."

"Your key messages in a presentation may be missed by the audience unless you tag them, that's the most important thing to remember."

“Listen up! Without tagging, and this is a really important point, your key messages may fall on deaf ears. Remember it!”

### *Story telling*

We're suckers for a good story. We spend millions of our hard-earned cash on books and cinema tickets. So when you use a story (see also under the chapter on structure) as a vehicle for your key messages you're tapping into this human desire to tell and be told stories. Stories follow a familiar and therefore memorable basic structure. Think of the Good Samaritan. We remember the template because it's a story we've been told, in effect, many, many times. Use an archetypal story template for your presentation and you'll automatically be making it more memorable.

### *Primacy and latency*

Audiences won't remember your presentation word for word. In fact, they probably won't remember very much of it all. Few of us have the power of total recall. But most of us can remember the beginning and the end. Especially the end. And particularly if the end is followed by a long and meaningful pause to let it sink in...

So given that the human mind better remembers the beginning and the end of something, position your key messages where they are more readily recalled. That can mean placing the important stuff at the beginning and/or end of a sentence; the beginning and/or end of a passage of speech (paragraph); and at the beginning and/or end of the whole speech.

Read these four sentences out loud:

If you don't put your seat belt on at the start of your journey there's a chance you'll die if you are involved in an accident.

If you don't put your seat belt on at the start of your journey, if you are involved in an accident there's a chance you'll die.

Die! That's what might happen if you don't put your seat belt on at the start of your journey and you are involved in an accident.

Die! That's what might happen if you don't put your seat belt on at the start of your journey and you are involved in an accident. Don't die.

In the first version the key word “die” is buried mid sentence and less effective. In the second and third versions it's more prominent at the end and the beginning respectively. In the final version it's rammed home by being first *and* last. Being first and last also has the virtue of repeating the word twice so it's promotional power is doubled or even trebled.

So powerful is the last word that it has its own catchphrase...

## *Catchphrases*

In the same way that a catchy bar of two a song can get stuck in our ears so a catchy word or two from a presentation can get stuck in our minds. I mentioned in the chapter on style how we should aspire to use words that carry our precise meaning most effectively. Clever speech writers now the power of words. Think of the EU referendum. The winning side had the great catchphrases:

“Take back control.”

“Make Britain great again.”

By comparison the losing side’s calls to action weren’t nearly as compelling or memorable.

“We concede that the EU is less than perfect but would submit that it’s better to effect change from within rather than without.”

The closest they got was to be a rule maker not just a rule taker. You can read more on the concept of catchphrases in relation to the EU referendum here.

## *Hooks*

The purpose of a hook (or memory peg) is to forge a strong link in the audience’s minds between something striking and/or memorable and a key message or messages. The best hooks trigger memories of your key messages well after the actual presentation has finished.

Let me give you an example. I use Bruce Forsyth as a hook in my media training workshops. I mention his name and ask the audience to shout out the first thing they think of. Invariably they say “cuddly toy.” I then ask them what the cuddly toy is sitting on whilst making a sweeping movement with my outstretched arms to encourage the right response. “Conveyor belt,” they shout. Next I ask what Bruce said most every week and, in unison, they all say (again with a little encouragement from me if necessary): “Nice to see you, to see you nice!” Which is a kind of? “Catchphrase,” they reply

I then go on to explain my three Generation Game techniques for promoting key messages in media interviews (not very different to the techniques outlined here). And at the end of my explanation I tell them that they will remember the techniques the next time they see Bruce on television or read about him on the newspapers.

Here’s a more straightforward visual metaphor-come-memory peg. In a presentation designed to get senior colleagues to agree to your proposal you say you want them to give you the go ahead whilst showing them the image of a green traffic light in the knowledge that the next time they see a green light (on the drive home that night ideally) they think of you and, more importantly, your proposal in positive (green) light.

A word of warning. If your hook or memory peg isn’t in some way related to the overall purpose of your presentation the audience may see it as a gimmick instead and (subconsciously at least) discount the very point you want them to remember.

Ten

# NERVES

## *Butterflies are beautiful*

If you can't sleep, then get up and do something instead of lying there worrying. It's the worry that gets you, not the lack of sleep.

Dale Carnegie

Dry tongues. Wet armpits. Jellied legs. We've all felt nervous at some time - even those who routinely present to millions of people on television and radio. And those who say they haven't are either big fat fibbers or dead from the neck up.

Nervousness is what tells us we're alive - along with a few other physiological niceties like breathing, of course. In fact nervousness and breathing are bodily bed fellows - if you're feeling the former it's more difficult to do the latter. To the point where you risk beginning your presentation with lungs as empty as if you'd just outstripped Usain Bolt in a hundred metre dash. And believe me I've been there. Not in a running race but in a mad, hyperventilating rush to get to the end of the opening sentence whilst reading the news. It wasn't even a long sentence come to think of it: "Hello, good evening..." So how can we say good night to our nerves?

- 1 Say hello to your nerves
- 2 Make a plan
- 3 Practice make perfect
- 4 Grow your confidence from a solid start
- 5 Focus on success
- 6 Breathe deeply
- 7 Speak slowly
- 8 Feed off the audience
- 9 Admit nothing
- 10 Share the load

## *Say hello to your nerves*

Our minds move in a mysterious way. We begin by worrying about the actual presentation - let's call this the *primary* concern. Then we begin to worry about the consequences of a poor presentation. We imagine ourselves looking stupid in front of colleagues, being passed over for promotion or maybe even sacked. In effect this *secondary* concern doubles our worry. But hang on a minute. We haven't actually failed yet. We're not really on the platform looking at a sea of unforgiving and unfamiliar faces. It's just a bad dream. Make that a nightmare. In the dead of night we've snapped awake with a start, drenched in sweat. A bad attack of THE FEAR OF FAILURE! At this point we need to drag ourselves out of bed, go to the bathroom and have a long, hard look in the mirror. Give ourselves a cheer up smack. Say out loud: "I will succeed."

Now I know what you're thinking. He's beginning to sound like some whacky American lifestyle guru. What about us shy, retiring Brits who wouldn't say boo to a goose let alone "I will succeed" to a mirror? Okay here's the UK equivalent: "Hello mirror old chap. Awfully sorry to disturb you at this unearthly hour. Any chance I could have a quiet word with you? You see I've got this presentation to do. I don't mean to burden you unnecessarily with my troubles but..."

Look, whatever you say in your moment of reflection don't mention the word failure. Fear's fine. But put fear to work. Harness the fear. Channel the nervous energy into planning and the imagined dire consequences - the secondary concern - are much less likely to come true. So don't go back to bed. Start a plan.

## *Make a plan*

Planning is so crucial to any nerve reduction strategy that it deserves a post all of its own and at some point I'll do just that. On my presentation and public speaking skills workshops I encourage delegates to think about the following steps:

Purpose - what do you want your presentation to achieve?

Audience - who's watching?

Context - where are you giving the presentation and what are the physical and intellectual barriers to communication?

Content - what do you need to tell them?

Structure - what's the best order to communicate your content?

Style - what's the most appropriate style to communicate your content?

A good plan probably won't get rid of your fear entirely. But it can make the difference between the adrenaline-max version which makes us want to run away and the adrenalin-lite type whose purpose is to encourage us to stay and do a good job. Flight or fight.



## *Practice makes perfect*

Done a plan but still feeling nervous? Nothing unusual there. They may feel the same, but what you've got now is a different type of nervousness. Not the *disabling* fear of failure that springs from a lack of planning but the *enabling* fear designed to get us to carry out our plan. Performance nerves not planning nerves. Actors plan well. They learn their lines. Do endless rehearsals. Yet they still get first night nerves. Sir Laurence Olivier and Barbara Streisand both suffered an extreme version of it called stage fright. So you're in good company. I prefer to call it pre-presentation panic. But as Corporal Jones would put it: "Don't panic!" Again subdue the nerves by acknowledging them and use the nervous energy to rehearse. What's the old adage? Practice makes perfect.

## *Grow your confidence from a solid start*

Even with practice you're going to feel nervous when it comes to the real thing. And the bigger the audience the greater the fear. But enabling fear dissipates the moment you start your presentation. It's why in the planning phase you design and practice a simple start. One you know you can manage even with a few jitters. If, when I was reading the news, a producer had written a long or complex introduction to the lead story, one where even the sub clauses, the bane of simple speech, had sub clauses and it looked, with my shattered nerves, that I'd be unlikely to reach the full stop, that welcome little dot indicating the end of the sentence, without expiring, then - a bit like this convoluted nonsense richly deserves - I'd split the sentence into more manageable chunks. Tiny. Little. Bits. So take a deep breath...

## *Breath deeply*

Our heart rate increases when we're scared. We breathe more quickly too and the breaths we take tend to be shallower. Although not always. Sometimes we forget to breath altogether. Which is kind of weird given that most of the time we don't have to think about breathing at all because it just comes naturally. So restore the natural order of things by taking ten deep breaths whenever you feel the panic rising and the heart quickening. In through the nose for at least three seconds. And out through the mouth for a similar count. Stilling our bodies stills our minds. Stilling our minds stills our bodies. Circular breaths.

## *Speak slowly*

When we're nervous we tend to speak more quickly. Which is understandable because the quicker we speak the sooner our presentation is over and we can relax. But although the instinct is right, the reaction is wrong. For two main reasons: that we may be speaking so quickly the audience can't keep up; and that we may trip over our words like Mr Spooner of Spoonerism fame who *meant* to raise a toast to the dear old Queen but instead raised a toast to the queer old dean.

Slowing down is easy to say but harder to do. I find concentrating on the pauses provided by the full stops and commas of speech a better way of slowing down. Pausing for effect....letting a point sink in...counting to five slowly in my head before moving on.

### *Focus on success*

When we want something to be over with (like my visit to the dentist the other day) we tend to focus on the finish line. But like speaking too quickly, doing so can make us rush and more likely to trip over. Try focussing instead on the purpose of your presentation. This subtle shift can be transformative. Not achieved your purpose yet? Then don't sit down until you have. Achieved your purpose? Then sit down now. Purposeful presentations are very often shorter presentations.

Focussing on success can also help by putting our nerves into perspective. One of the best presentations I've ever seen was delivered by someone who, by her own admission, was extremely nervous beforehand. The young woman was raising money and awareness for stroke patients. Afterwards I asked how she'd managed her fear and she said: "By concentrating on the outcome and realising that my own fear was nothing compared to the suffering of the people my speech was designed to help." Wise words.

### *Feed off the audience*

The audience is more supportive than you might imagine. They really don't want you to fail - except perhaps the few ruthlessly competitive individuals who'd like your job at any price and might benefit from a stuff up on your part. Most people know from bitter personal experience what you're going through as you clear your throat ready to speak. Tune into and draw on this positive vibe or empathy. With a big audience it all adds up to a lot of people rooting for you. Your very own personal cheer leaders if you like - without the ra ra skirts and pom poms!

If the audience still feels like a huge, amorphous blob ready to gobble you up for breakfast, scan the crowd and try to find a friendly face or two. Maybe you met them over coffee ten minutes ago or you've known them a lifetime. Nodding acquaintance or bosom buddy, engage with these individuals eye-to-eye. Remember where they're sitting and return to them now and again when you feel the need. It's best in a big venue if you choose at least four friendly faces - back, front, left and right. Look in only one direction and you risk visually excluding everyone else. Incidentally, even though you may be looking at only four in a hundred faces the 96 other people think you're looking at them. It's all down to the physical properties of light and how waves propagate. Certainly way too complex to get into here so let's just call it an optical illusion. In a small venue, however, this "magic" doesn't work in your favour and it means trying to make eye contact with everyone. In the film *Zulu* the actor Michael Caine uttered the immortal line: "Don't shoot til you see the whites of their eyes." Your words are less likely to hit their target if you shoot your mouth off before you can see the whites of the audience's eyes. Not a lot of people know that.

## *Admit nothing*

Whilst all of the above can help us deal with our nerves they never truly go away. And sometimes, mid presentation, they can come bounding out of the shadows and attack us when we least expect it. We *feel* the butterflies in our stomach stomping around in size 12 boots. We *feel* our hands going cold and our faces getting hot. But the operative word here is *feel*. Feelings are just that - felt. They're rarely manifested to the extent that the audience even notices them. And what the audience can't see can't hurt you. For example, don't apologise for losing your place or missing out a bit. The audience doesn't know you've lost your place or missed out a bit unless you've given them a script to follow beforehand - rarely a good idea.

Mind you it is possible to make the invisible visible. Tony Blair made the mistake of wearing a shirt that not only showed he was sweating but also became see through. It's hard to take anybody seriously when you can see their nipples. My own salutary lesson would have been even more chastening had it not been for some quick thinking. I was chairing an event one summer and decided on the Martin Bell look - a creamy coloured linen suit. But I hadn't reckoned on the faulty plumbing. Not mine I hasten to add even though the audience wouldn't have reached the same charitable conclusion. Nipping to the loo for a pre-presentation pee - another physiological response to fear - I was careful not to leave a tell tale splash only to be stymied at the hand-washing phase. Just a quarter turn of the hot tap unleashed a torrent of water with the force of an Icelandic geyser. Up the basin and down the trousers in a pattern for which there could be only two explanations - neither of them relishing. Accusations of a bad aim or incontinence were narrowly avoided by whipping off the offending trousers, soaking them in the washbasin, wringing them out and putting them back on. Fashionably and visibly crumpled and universally but invisibly damp. The moral of these stories? Stop sweating. And don't go to the toilet. Or, more feasibly, choose your suits, shirts and blouses carefully.

## *Share the load*

A problem solved is a problem halved, or so the saying goes. There's a presentational equivalent: a speech shared is a speech halved. In the world of broadcast news and current affairs the busiest shows are very often double headed - that is, there are two presenters. It's not just done for cosmetic reasons. It's also because fast-paced and quick-changing programmes can be too much of a challenge for one presenter. And in the same way long or complex presentations can be too much for one speaker. So why not double head them? Buddy up with a colleague. Share the load. Half the nerves.