



Presentation Tips

Selections from
NeuroDojo

Zen Faulkes

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Selections from the NeuroDojo blog

[http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/search/label/Zen of Presentations](http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/search/label/Zen%20of%20Presentations)

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Other versions

This book is also available in a Kindle edition at Amazon.com. The Kindle version has been adjusted to improve its appearance in ebook readers.

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B008DKI1ZU>

A Russian language translation is available, courtesy of Maksim, in PDF format.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B9AHIOwjETboM3ZUM3IDazFkNjg>

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Planning what to say

What makes a good speaker?

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2011/01/zen-of-presentations-part-37-what-makes.html>

When I teach a seminar class, I start off by asking the students to name a speaker they have seen who gave a great presentation, and describe what made it memorable. As they go, I write down the things they mention as why this presentation was so good.

I might not end up with exactly the same words every time, but the concepts listed are consistent. The last time I did this, this was written on the board at the end of the class:

- Empathy.
- Simplicity.
- Humour.
- Feeling like the speaker was talking to you specifically.
- Confidence.
- Mastery of the material.
- Energy.
- Engagement.
- Emotional.
- Credible.
- Stories.
- Surprise.
- Sincere.
- Different perspective.
- Passionate.

Yet people are so reluctant to do the things as a speaker that they themselves *just told me* that they enjoy as an audience member.

Humour is the most obvious example. My students consistently bring it up as something good speakers do. But I've sat through an uncounted number of student talks without any hint of an attempt at humour.

I suppose that the reason people don't do these things is that underlying many of the concepts on that list are *risk* and *hard work*.

You take a risk when you tell a joke. People might not laugh.

You take a risk when you try to get people to empathize. You have to expose what you think and feel.

And there are no short cuts to mastering the material or establishing credibility.

This time, a few specific talks got mentioned, including Randy Pausch's The Last Lecture and Neil deGrasse Tyson's conversation with Richard Dawkins on The Poetry of Science (not really a presentation in the usual sense). Still, many people mentioned people they knew personally; preachers or pastors came up several times this session. Good presenters are everywhere, and don't need a million hits on YouTube to make an impression and make a difference.

It's all about you

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2006/01/zen-of-presentation-part-2-its-all.html>

If ever there was a presentation where the visual should completely dominate the presentation, it was a talk I saw by one of the people who was closely involved in the cleaning of Michelangelo's frescos on the Sistine Chapel. The slides were, of course, glorious. (This was still before PowerPoint had killed slide carousels; these were real 35 mm film slides). When the first one went up, showing one of the frescos before and after cleaning, the whole audience let out an audible gasp.

The speaker paused and said, "You are a good audience."

I remember him. I remember his dry sense of humour, his Italian accent, his self-deprecation. At one point, he showed a video of the cleaning where he was seated, watching someone else work, and joked when he gestured in the video about the hard work he had to do supervising. (He had lifted his hand, pointed, and set it back down.) I remember an answer he gave to a question from an audience member about how remove the plaster that had been added to censor nudes; he said they would not even try it, because that would not be true to the spirit of Michelangelo's work.

I wish I could remember his name, but that's not the point. I remember him and what he had to say.

Extraordinary talks are almost never extraordinary because of the slides. They're memorable because of the personality of the speaker and the story he or she has to tell.

It's not just me saying this. When I ask students to name someone that they thought was a good speaker, and tell me why they admired that particular person, their responses fall into a few broad categories. Enthusiasm. Humour. Expertise. Sincerity.

"Great slides" never comes up.

Buying credibility

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2012/02/zen-of-presentations-part-49-buying.html>

T rue credibility is something you have to build. You have to develop a consistent track record of saying and doing smart things. It's a long, hard road to build that trust.

It's only natural that people look for short cuts.

Beginners and students, acutely aware of their own limitations of experience or knowledge, often try to buy credibility. There are two common tricks that people try.

The first is to pull out the swanky clothes. This is not a terrible thing to do, since it usually helps make the speaker feel better and more confident. But if you are with audience members that know you, there might not be that big a bump in credibility. When I teach a seminar class, I can usually tell who is presenting that day, because they're dressed nothing like the way they've dressed in the previous month. Instead of track pants and hoodies, suddenly there are skirts and shirts that might comfortably hold a tie.

The second is to talk in a way that a person normally does not talk. This is nicely spelled out in this post about writing, but it's just as true for presentations (original emphasis):

(S)tudents tend to make the kind of mistakes in the formal research paper that they do not make in informal writing (such as blogs) that the sociolinguist William Labov found among working class speakers aspiring to be middle class: use of the word "whom" in situations where it is ungrammatical but sounds fancy, use of semantically incorrect but pretentious vocabulary ("Thesaurusitis"), longer sentences that lack punch but sound "upper class," lack of demonstrative language, vague construction that lacks a point ("In this essay it shall be argued that...").

A student giving a jargon filled talk is reacting much like a blue-collar worker trying to fit in with a bunch of suits.

Of course, we know how this turns out. We've read this book and seen this movie: George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and its musical offspring, *My Fair Lady*. Henry Higgins tries to buy credibility for Eliza Doolittle by teaching her to talk in received English. But even as her pronunciation improves, she still gives herself away with every word she says.

You can fool some of the people some of the time when you try to buy credibility. But if the veneer scratches, even a little, things can fall apart almost immediately. This is particularly true in academic settings, where most of the audience has been highly trained to question, pry, be on the lookout for bullshit, find the weakness in the ideas and arguments, and attack any helpless underbelly.

When you try to buy credibility, the price you pay is in your authenticity. And I'd say that's also pretty important in giving a great presentation.

Lessons from the blind

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2010/08/zen-of-presentations-part-34-lessons.html>

I was lucky enough to do a post-doc with David Macmillan. David is a wonderful person, and a terrific scientist. He was very active, and the sort of person you could see wondering, “What will I do when I retire?”

About two years ago, David got an unexpected answer: Learn to live blind.

David lost his sight in *one day* from an autoimmunity problem.

But thanks to the technology available now, he barely slowed down. He continued to serve as department head and an editor of the journal *Marine and Freshwater Behavior and Physiology*. He jokes with fellow neuroethologists, “I reckon I have the visual system of a primitive mollusc.”

Of course, being blind gives you a different perspective. David said that since he lost his sight, he realized that there are two kinds of presenters:

- Those who tell a story, and use slides as a supplement to their story.
- Those who make their slides, show them, and comment on them.

Even without being able to see the slides that are pervasive in scientific talks, David is able to enjoy the former. But he gets frustrated and bored with the latter.

Or, to borrow from *Educating Rita*, can you do it on the radio? Do you have a verbal narrative that carries you through without slides?

Again and again and again, like a drumbeat: Tell people a story. They’ll love you for it.

Tell a story

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2008/01/zen-of-presentations-part-16-tell-story.html>

Everybody loves a good story. In a very real sense, it's how we make sense of our lives.

Presentations are little one act plays. Anyone giving a presentation should think about how to make it a better story. And that may be easier than you think.

There are three story elements can be meaningfully incorporated into almost any presentation.

Character. Who is this presentation about? In a lot of cases, it's about you, so you should try to give the audience a sense of who you are. Your foibles, motivations, background, and so on. Joe Straczynski (*Babylon 5*) describe a story thus:

As someone (E.M. Forster - ZF) noted, "The king died, and the queen died" is not a plot or a story; "The king died, and the queen died of grief" IS a story, IS a plot; there is connective tissue.

We recognize "The queen died of grief" is a more effective story, because we get a sense of relationship and therefore character.

Conflict. It's the essence of drama. Chris Carter (*The X-Files*) was once as saying that all you need for drama are two people, in a room, with different opinions. Any time there are differing opinions, you have the start of a story.

Mystery. We love mysteries, as one of the marks of the best stories is to be asking, "What's going to happen next?" Create puzzles for your audience, and bring them along for the solution. This is where scientific talks **can** excel, because the whole scientific process is aimed at uncovering a mystery. Unfortunately, scientific presentations rarely **do** excel at this, because people are often so poor at laying out why we should care. Here's where understanding character (who the puzzle matters to) and conflict (do people have different ideas about the puzzle solution?) can help bring forth a greater level of intrigue and desire for people to know what will happen next.

Redundant and repetitive

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2009/12/zen-of-presentations-part-31-redundant.html>

This is common advice: “Tell them what you’re going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you just told them.”

I’ve never been crazy about that advice, particularly for a typical academic conference talk. Most conference presentations are 15 minutes. Given that the usual problem is managing to cram the complexity of research into a 12 minute presentation (so you have time for questions), every second is valuable.

Writer Michael Crichton once described how one of *Jurassic Park’s* scientific advisors (Jack Horner, maybe?) bemoaned that the paleontology scene in the opening of the movie wasn’t as realistic as it could be. The advisor had even suggested to Steven Spielberg a scene that was a little more accurate. Crichton asked how much longer the scene would be than what was in the movie. “About a minute.” Crichton replied it was no wonder it wasn’t used, because a minute is a long time in a movie.

If you’re the sort of person who watches the bonus features on DVDs, you’ll recognize this as one of the main reasons that scenes are cut. You will often hear a director saying, “This was a nice character beat, but it didn’t provide us with any new information,” or, “We just wanted to get the plot going as fast as possible.”

That economy of storytelling is something many presenters would do well to imitate.

Few movies lay out what’s going to happen in the first act of the film. (Exceptions: Caper movies, where the whole idea is to lay out a plan in detail, then watch where it goes wrong.) Likewise, movies usually don’t end with a series of flashbacks or dialogue recapping the plot the characters have just gone through.

Yet I frequently see people using “Outline” slides (some of my colleagues require their students to have them), with a series of bullet points that are often almost identical to the list of standard sections in a scientific paper. I do not find this valuable in a short talk, particularly

given that many technical talks do not have enough introductory material.

I do think repetition is good, particularly in a teaching context, where you want people to retain information for long periods. But there are more natural ways to do it than having a bland outline at the start or an instant replay recap at the end.

Experts and basics

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2009/12/zen-of-presentations-part-30-entertain.html>

A common problem with technical presentations is that people do not give enough introductory material. There are two understandable slides, and then the speaker steps on the gas and leaves you behind. One rationale for skimping on introductory material is often that, “I know experts will be in the audience, and I don’t want to bore them with material they already know.”

How many times have you watched your favourite movie, listened to a favourite song, or read a favourite book? More than once? Why? Do you think Bogart is going to get on that plane with Bergman when you play the movie *this* time?

We can revisit favourites and still enjoy them. We’re not bored because we know what’s going to happen. Instead, we actually take pleasure in something because it’s familiar.

Experts got to be experts in a field usually because they love that stuff. They’re about as likely to be bored by introductory material as a film fan would be bored by watching a great film again. Plus, even when the experts know the material, they won’t have heard it your way. It’s like listening to two different artists playing the same song; each can bring something new to it that makes it enjoyable and worth listening to again. Covering the basics might even make an expert feel good, by reinforcing and confirming her expert status to herself.

If your choice is between boring and confusing an audience member, **pick boredom**. You can bring a bored audience member back on board, but it’s almost impossible to bring a confused audience member back to the fold. Don’t be afraid if your talk is as much as half introductory material. If you do it right, everyone will be able to follow you through to the end, experts and novices alike.

Doing it versus talking about it

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2012/03/zen-of-presentations-part-53-doing-it.html>

When you are in the thick of a research project, you spend a huge amount of time working out practical details.

Because of how much time you have spent learning that technique, getting some initial preliminary results, then having it mysteriously fail for no reason, troubleshooting, learning that your boss calls part of the technique “black voodoo magic,” offering sacrifices to the lab gods, it is understandable that when you are given the chance to talk about that research, there is a temptation to spend the same amount of time describing those techniques.

This is particularly a trap for people who are just coming into a project. When I learned a new technique, I was so excited about this technique giving me my first data that I focused too much on the technique, and not enough on the data.

In research articles, the methods section is often set in small text or placed last in the article, after the conclusions. Both of these are good indications that descriptions of techniques and methodologies are “fine print.” Relatively few people are going to be tremendously excited by how you optimised your buffers, or found a great way to manipulate data in Excel.

People want context. That means a lot of introduction. Many presentations jump into the details way too fast. A lot of good technical presentations are characterized by long introductions. Having an introduction take up half your talk is not out of the question. The data that answers a question and what you conclude about it should make up most of the rest.

The time you spend talking about stuff you did in your project need not – indeed, should not – bear much relationship to the amount of time you spent on that task.

Lectures are never the best presentations

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2011/08/zen-of-presentations-part-43-not-our.html>

Almost anyone giving a presentation has been a student, and that means that you've listened to a lot of lectures.

Some lecturers are better than others. In universities, you may be lucky enough to have some professors who are world famous for their scholarship; people at the absolute top of their professional game.

Whether you're aware of it or not, you may well be influenced by the style of lecturers. That might affect how you give presentations, either in class or elsewhere.

Don't make that mistake.

A university instructor has two or three different classes a semester. For each class, that instructor has three hours of class time per week, for a total of six to nine hours of stuff every week. Let's say eight hours, for the sake of argument.

The key to great presentations is practice. I consider at least two "out loud" run throughs before the actual presentation to be my bare, scraping-the-bottom-of-the-barrel minimum for conference presentations. Hundreds of hours of work go into every Apple keynote, for which they are rightly praised.

Rehearsing each lecture twice would require 24 hours of rehearsal and lecture time a week. And remember, we still haven't added in time needed research what the information to put on those slides, or the time spent organizing the information in a coherent way for students, never mind everything besides lectures that instructors have to do.

Because of the lack of rehearsal, it's almost necessary to use your slides as notes. Lecturers are routinely guilty of "reading each bullet point aloud as it come up" style of presenting because of this.

When I'm lecturing, it's not my best work as a presenter. It can't be. There's too much stuff and not enough time.

Lectures are not good examples of what to do presentations. Even the best instructors have to compromise on the best presentation practices to get the lectures done.

“I hate this topic”

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2012/02/zen-of-presentations-part-50-i-hate.html>

It's easy to give a talk about your own research. Your own story. Your own project.

What about those times when you have to give a presentation on a topic that... frankly... doesn't wind your crank? As an instructor, I often have to give presentations on topics that I don't care about. When I first started here, I had to teach general biology, which included a bunch of material that, to be honest, I had never learned before. The old joke is that in your first semester teaching a class, all you have to be is one lesson ahead of the students.

The path of least resistance is to aim for factual competence. If you're coming into a subject cold, your first concern is to say things that are correct so you won't look like an idiot. But “just the facts” doesn't make for a compelling presentation. Anyone who wants facts can Google answers faster than you can present them.

Sometimes, people presenting on something they didn't choose will undercut their own material. They'll indicate, sometimes explicitly, sometimes through hints, that they don't like the topic.

Having disdain for your subject is lethal to a presentation. If you signal that this is not important to you, you are signalling that it's not important to the audience. This makes it a great big waste of time for all concerned.

Not everyone has the same interests, though. Some people may get something out of it that you don't. If you respect your audience, at least *pretend* to have a good time while you're up there!

But it's even better if you can go a step beyond getting the facts right and putting on the fake service industry smile.

I once heard an interview with an educator who talked about this problem. He argued that an instructor had to find some sort of personal connection with the material.

The question came up: How do you find a personal connection with, say, the Pythagorean theorem? Trigonometry can be an abstract, bloodless subject.

His answer was to talk about how the ancients calculated the size of the earth. In the city of Syrene, there was a well that the sun shone down directly at noon on a particular day of the year. On the same day in the city of Alexandria, the sun didn't shine directly overhead. A post would cast a short shadow.

From those two pieces of information, the mathematician Eratosthenes calculated the size of the Earth, and came very close to the right answer.

The person being interviewed found this fascinating, and that was his personal connection to this particular bit of geometry. And you can see why: it's a great story.

"And if you don't find that personal connection?" asked the interviewer.

"Boredom. Endless boredom."

I faced a similar problem teaching aerobic respiration, which is soul destroying in the wrong hands. I needed a hook that made presenting it interesting to me. What I eventually hit on was to use a block of chocolate, with six pieces. I tell the students each piece of chocolate represents one carbon atom in a glucose molecule. As we go through the process of turning a sugar molecule into ATP, I break the chocolate down and give each piece (representing carbon in the exhaled carbon dioxide) to a student.

To be honest, I don't know if having the chocolate model helps the students learn at all. But that wasn't the point: I do it for **me**. I needed a way to engage with cellular respiration and have fun with it. Because if I'm not engaged, why should I be surprised if my students are not engaged?

There should always be a way to connect with the material. An eloquent person should find no subject sterile.

U and W

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2008/07/zen-of-presentations-part-19-u-and-w.html>

Memory is U shaped. People tend to have higher recall for the start of things and the end of things than bits in the middle. The tendency to remember the start of things is the “primacy effect,” and the tendency to remember the end is the “recency effect.”

Consequently, the start and end of a presentation are rather important, because that’s something people will tend to remember no matter what you do. This is both a blessing and a curse, since you don’t have to work hard here. If you summarize your talk at the opening and closing, people will tend to get the message and you don’t have to do a lot of work to get their attention and have them remember it. On the other hand, if the opening or closing do not go smoothly... they’ll remember that, too.

Presentations should be W shaped. I first became aware of how screen writers approached pacing by an article about Malcolm Hulke, who wrote a lot of television in the 1960s and 1970s, and wrote a book about it. Hulke argued that a story should be W shaped. You need something at the start to get the audience’s attention, and a big finish – which is perfectly in line with the U shape of memory recall.

The place where you have to do the most work is in the middle.

After a few minutes, people’s attention starts to drift. It’s in the middle of a presentation that people are less likely to be engaged. You have to do something to bring them back on board, and keep them engaged. This is the middle peak of the W. In a presentation, there are several things you can do. Change the pace or the tone. Do the unexpected. Do something to refocus the audience’s attention. If this was a movie or a TV show, you would have a car chase, plot twist, or a dinosaur appear.

This discussion from a [Nature podcast](#) is, I think, another variation on the “W” scheme:

Focussing in a way on the idea of mini-cliffhanger this seems to be a thing that lots of good movies have in common. If you imagine Bruce Willis making his way through the skyscraper in *Die Hard*, he has sort of intermittent battles with the terrorists, which kind of comes to our head at various points and then things calm down a bit and then a new cliffhanger builds up and he gets into another fight. ...

(W)eirdly enough that pattern also seems to happen in *Casablanca*, if you imagine, Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman’s characters. They are not fighting obviously, but while they are in a way, they’re, sort of, wrestling with their feelings and they are, sort of, drawn together and then apart and together and there is a, sort of, mini-cliffhanger’s feeling there(.)

A “mini-cliffhanger” is one way to create that middle peak of the W.

The Ehrlich method

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2007/12/zen-of-presentations-part-14-erlich.html>

The Australian radio show *In Conversation* recently played two excerpts from a presentation by Paul Ehrlich. Presenter and interviewer Robyn Williams, who I imagine has seen more than his fair share of incredible talks by some of the world's best thinkers (interviewing them is his job, after all), was impressed.

He described Ehrlich's talk in the [first part](#) thus:

Here is an internationally renowned biologist and environmental stirrer, at the Perth Convention Centre, strolling on stage with his hands in his pockets or gesticulating for effect, and just chatting. No notes in sight; just that Paul Robeson, rich baritone and a few incendiary remarks(.

In [part two](#), Williams elaborates:

I was going to call him the ecological answer to Jerry Seinfeld, but the difference is *edge*. Among the jokes and segues Paul Ehrlich really means some of those barbs.

Williams refers to Ehrlich as having a "conversation" with his audience and is impressed enough to ask specifically about how he does it.

Robyn Williams: So what enables him at the age of 75, to pace around a stage at the Convention Centre in Perth with no notes, speaking like a Gatling Gun to an audience of 600?

Paul Ehrlich: What I do is I engrave my notes on the inside of my eyelids so all I have to do is blink to be able to read them.

RW: *laughs...* It's quite extraordinary. There are two ways of taking this way of having a conversation. You have a conversation with an audience. Either you always say the same thing - or - you've extremely well organised. Which is it?

PE: I always say the same thing... *laughs...* no... It's not a matter of organisation, in fact it's a very simple thing. You know a number of things you want to say; you organise them into routines, so you can leave them in or add another one, and

depending on the audience you have a basic idea of what you're going to talk about, so it's not all that complicated.

There's a useful idea in there. What Ehrlich calls "routines," I think of as making a talk modular.

This is particularly a way I structure a series of lectures. Over time, I develop a set of lectures. In any given semester, I put in some but take out others. Once you get each individual piece ready, it's easy to slot them in, take some in, leave others out, and mix it up.

But what if you have just one presentation you're working on?

If you're using slides, you have a natural Ehrlich "routine" right there. Make each one a little self-contained story.

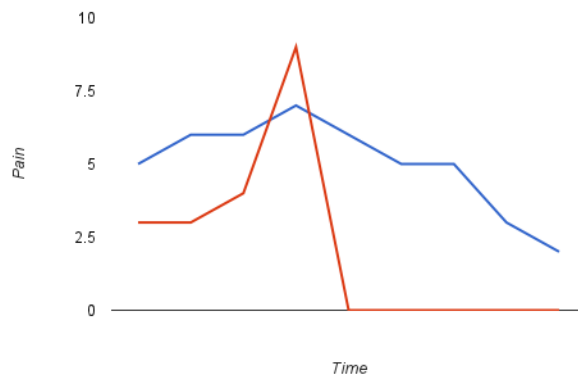
Organize your "routines" so that you have the most important stuff first. When I wrote for newspapers, well before digital publishing allowed very clear calculations of how much space you had, articles would often have to be longer or shorter. So the trick was to break the story down. Put all the important stuff up front. Anything that was interesting, but tangential or dispensable, you put in the last paragraphs. That way, if the story had to be cut due to space limitations, the main thrust of the story was intact and undamaged.

It's like a set list for a band. A band gives a different concert each night, and each can be totally different. They can do this because they don't do their entire repertoire of songs. They pick a subset. Before every performance, the band writes out what songs they're going to do.

Big finish

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2012/03/zen-of-presentations-part-52-big-finish.html>

Two people go in for a rather invasive and somewhat painful surgical procedure. The nature of the procedure means that they can't be anesthetized. To keep track of their pain, the physicians ask the patients to rate the level of pain they're experiencing at regular intervals, from one to ten. Imagine this is charted below, with the "0" for the red line being because the procedure was done by them.



Some months later, on a follow-up, the patients are asked to describe their overall experience.

You would expect the patient whose responses that are plotted in blue in the chart above would report the experience being much worse. If you add all the numbers, this person's average pain was higher, and they were in pain for much longer.

The patient whose responses are in red usually reports the experience being much worse than the patient whose responses are in blue. Why?

Endings matter.

The entire experience is profoundly influenced by that last memory. The patient in red ends in almost excruciating pain; the patient in blue ends with mild discomfort. And that last experience tends to be one that sticks.

This might explain why twist endings in movies and television and other stories are so divisive. They can be spectacularly successful or agonizingly bad. Sometimes a great ending saves a movie or episode and turns the run-of-the-mill into something quite amazing (e.g., *The Sixth Sense*). How many times have you been going along, carried along with a story... and the ending ruins it, and you leave with a sour taste in your mouth? (E.g., *Jacob's Ladder*).

The most popular talk on the Ignite! website to date ("[How to Buy a New Car](#)" by Rob Gruhl) talk is popular because it is useful, but it could be significantly improved by working on the ending. The last slide is... a recap? What do you need a recap in a five minute talk for? Peoples' memories aren't that bad.

Nancy Duarte nailed what an ending should be in her book [Resonate](#): a vision for a better tomorrow. She calls it, "the new bliss." The new bliss sets out what could be, if the audience takes the story you have told them and acts on it.

A great example of an ending that lays out a new bliss was Hans Rosling at TED talking about the [magic washing machine](#). A world with washing machines is not just a world with clean laundry. A world with washing machines is a world where machines have freed up time for parents to read books to their children.

In a scientific talk, the new bliss can be something as simple as a more complete understanding of some fine theoretic point that people in your field will appreciate. It could be ruling out an hypothesis. Or it could be a shifted paradigm. Or maybe there are big potential practical spin-offs that could come out of the work.

Put a lot of work into your endings.

Planning what to show

The Bullock method

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2006/02/zen-of-presentations-part-3-can-you-do.html>

Science lost a real treasure in 2005 when Ted Bullock died at the age of 90. He was a neurobiologist of the first water. I somewhat selfishly took it upon myself to write a short obituary for the International Society for Neuroethology, for which Ted was the founding president. I was fortunate enough to meet Ted several times. In some ways, the first meeting was the most memorable. He came to the University of Victoria to give the last seminar of the academic year, at the invitation of Dorothy Paul, my Ph.D. supervisor. There were many remarkable things about his visit. For instance, when I had just driven him to campus from the airport, he walked into Dorothy's neurobiology class just as some undergraduate students got some microelectrodes into slug brains and were recording neurons' action potentials. After giving Dorothy a brief hug, Ted immediately doffed his coat, and grabbed a chair to sit and work with the students and talk about the recordings they were getting.

When Dorothy asked if he had any slides so that she might load up a slide carousel, Ted said he didn't have any. He said that the clearer the story was in his head, the fewer slides he needed. "No slides" was his definition of "nirvana."

The seminar he gave was extraordinary. I think it's still the only academic seminar I've seen where the speaker got up, talked for about 50 minutes or so, without a single slide, a single overhead, without writing a single word on a blackboard. Yet it was absolutely clear, and you never lost sight of the story he was telling. As Dorothy would later put it, "Even the plant physiologists were enthralled." (She wasn't implying that plant physiologists are a hard to please lot, but Ted was talking about neurobiology, which is rather off the beaten path for plant researchers.)

I saw Ted give talks at other meetings. A couple of other times, including the last time I saw him, at Western Nerve Net a couple of years ago, he presented it without slides, but those were much shorter talks.

I think anyone giving a talk should be ready to give a talk using the "Bullock method": be able to do the whole thing without slides.

Having said that, I have a confession to make. I've never had the guts to do an academic talk without some sort of slides. In fact, I put a lot of thought and effort into my slides. For one talk in January, I started working on my PowerPoint files in mid-November. But I would like to think that I could have given the talk on the radio, if I had to, and it would hopefully be understandable. I always aspire to have the story so clear in my head that I could go right to zero slides.

There's another reason to aspire to be able to give a talk without visual aids. There are two types of speakers: those who have had slide or visual aid disasters and those who haven't had one yet. Not only does preparing to give a talk on the radio force you to think about what you're saying, it gives you valuable insurance.

At one meeting I attended, I was in the audience for a presentation that was part of a student paper competition. The speaker was going along reasonably well. He tried to show a video – and froze the computer instead. Completely. During a juried presentation competition. He ultimately finished the talk, but the long pause while he tried to get the computer going was agonizing. You pretty have to think that cost him any chance he had in the competition.

My other favourite disaster story was at a Western Nerve Net meeting, where the first speaker for the regular presentations was an undergraduate giving her first talk. She was already nervous. And the slide carousel got upended, and put all her slides in a jumble.

Heck, my own seminar for my own job talk was almost derailed for lack of a cable to connect my computer to a projection system. Though because I am gutless, I was steadily filling a carousel with 35 mm film slides rather than “going Bullock” at the last second.

Reading out loud

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2007/04/zen-of-presentations-part-7-reading-out.html>

A recent [article](#) in the *Sydney Morning Herald* talks about using slides, particularly those in PowerPoint format. The key quote for me is, “It is effective to speak to a diagram, because it presents information in a different form. But it is not effective to speak the same words that are written, because it is putting too much load on the mind and decreases your ability to understand what is being presented.”

It nicely explains why so many people get so frustrated by seeing a talk where someone just reads the text on their slides, almost word for word.

Another annoyance factor in reading slides aloud that many people don't think of: the audience can read faster than you can talk. When you put up a slide of text, the audience will usually read the text first, and be waiting for you to catch up to your own text.

It is tough to get rid of text completely. I am guilty of using text slides all the time when I lecture. I console myself that sometimes, there is a legitimate teaching reason to put up text slides: because students need to be able to see the correct spelling of technical words. If I were to just say, “allele,” I have little confidence that students would be able to figure out the right spelling from the pronunciation alone. (There are various pronunciations, but the mode seems to be “a-leel,” not, as the spelling might lead you to think, “ah-l-el-lay.”)

When I do have a text slide, another thing I try to do is not to read it verbatim. I try to put the same information in a different way. Use examples. Elaborate. Often, I go on talking on a point much longer than the slide is up, so that people will get bored at the slide and their attention focuses back on me.

It is a constant challenge to presenters, including myself, to use more pictures – perhaps only pictures. And high quality pictures. Assuming, of course, that they need visual aids at all.

The language barrier

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2011/08/zen-of-presentations-part-44-language.html>

One of the most common pieces of advice for people giving a presentation is to get rid of almost all the text on the slides. There is quite a bit of research backing up this up.

There is one case where I would make an exception.

If you are speaking in your second language, have an accent, or some problem with your speech where people might misunderstand you, you might want to keep some of the text. More than if you and the audience are both fluent native speakers of the language, at any rate.

You don't need to write out every line as a bullet point and read it, like so many people fall back on. But you probably want to have a few key phrases spelled out in text. In particular, it can be helpful to spell out somewhere on a slide any technical words or phrases that people might not be used to hearing.

For example, I spent much of a semester in an undergraduate genetics class trying to figure out what a doughnut trait was. I finally realized that the instructor was talking about a dominant trait.

While people might be slightly annoyed by the amount of text, annoyance or boredom is always better than confusion.

Worse than reading bullet points

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2012/05/zen-of-presentations-part-54-worse-than.html>

Everyone hates it when presenters read bullet points. It is one of the most common complaints about what PowerPoint has done to presentations. We can all read faster than any presenter can speak. If there is no more information than once the presenter has written on the slide, it's excruciating to wait for them when we've already know what he is going to say.

But there is something that just might be worse than reading bullet points out loud.

Reading the **title** of each slide out loud.

Slide titles are often just single isolated words, or short descriptive phrases at best. Consequently, reading titles breaks the flow of your speech, and sounds completely unnatural.

"Morning, Ralph. How was your weekend?"

"Introduction. Pretty good. Got out, did some shopping."

"What did you buy?"

"Product description. Got a deal on a new flat screen TV."

For all their problems, bullet points usually at least resemble normal sentences. Bullet points read out might be simple and dull, but at least they're somewhat grammatical.

Redrawn

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2012/03/zen-of-presentations-part-51-redrawn.html>

“This is so ugly.”

I had been preparing for a talk at another university. For context and background, I wanted to include some graphs from other, previously published papers as well as my own stuff. But I had two problems.

First, the quality of the graphs I wanted to use wasn't always there. Many were old, pixelated images. Some graphs had unlabelled error bars, and some had text overlapping with error bars. Some bar graphs had hatching to distinguish the bars that was not very pleasing to look at.

Second, the style of the images I wanted to use varied wildly. Some were monochrome, some used colour. Some used serif types, some used sans serif type. The shape of the graphs sometimes didn't come anywhere near the shape of the slide.

Even with my own material, I was pulling together images from several years and projects – manuscripts, conference posters, unpublished stuff – and I was painfully aware that it didn't fit together very well. As I've written about before, consistency matters.

So I redrew everything.

With my own material, this was tedious but straightforward. I just had to locate a lot of archived files on my hard drive, opened them up, and started changing fonts, colours, and proportions.

Making other people's stuff consistent was trickier. First, I typically had to grab images. For PDF files, there is a snapshot tool in Adobe Reader that lets you do grabs of anything on the screen. It isn't turned on in the toolbar by default, though.

Once I had a grab of the graphic, I could then put it into a full graphics editor. For instance, I can get rid of text that I didn't need or remove the background. But even PowerPoint can do some basic manipulations quite well.

For some graphs, I needed to go right back to ground zero and redraw the graph in my own software. There is a shareware program called [Datathief](#) that I've used to get extract information from published graphs so I can replot it. It's fairly simple to use for distinct data points, like scatter plots or bar charts. I haven't tried to extract a curve yet. Datathief runs on many platforms, and there is a similar program for Mac users called [Graphclick](#). I have heard that data extraction from published graphs is possible in Matlab, though I haven't done it myself.

In the end, almost every image in my presentation was been altered, tweaked, cropped, redrawn, recoloured, resized, or revised. It took a few solid days to do it. I am convinced it's worth it, though. The harmony on the slides was so much higher than it would have been. The presentation was much stronger than if I had just left it looking like a scrappy quilt.

Title slides

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2006/02/zen-of-presentations-part-4-titles.html>

I became aware of this presentation tic at graduate seminars. The symposium moderator would get up, thank the previous speaker, then introduce the next speaker and tell the audience the title of the talk. The speaker would walk to the podium and put up their first slide which, more often than not, showed the title of the talk – the one that the moderator had just read. Not content with that, the speaker would then to look at their slide and, very earnestly and deliberately, proceed to read the title out loud.

So we get that blasted title three times over.

It drove me bonkers then, and drives me bonkers now. I only need to know a title once. Unfortunately, title slides are emblematic of a presentation style that is not beaten out of presenters anywhere near often enough: that is, reading directly from slides verbatim.

There are several reasons to avoid having a title slide. First, it burns up time. Particularly in science, I often have to present talks where I summarize complex information that took months or years to gather and analyze, and I have to do it in 15 minutes, including time for questions. I have to focus on what I need to say as directly and memorably and efficiently as possible.

Second, it can be a little distancing for the audience. You get up, and barely before the audience can look at your face, the lights are going down and people don't know whether to look at the slide, or look at you. Give yourself at least a few second to get up, let people see who you are. Maybe smile, if that's appropriate (not recommended if you're giving a talk about, say, deaths in sub-Saharan Africa from AIDS).

People like having a title slide, because it gives them a safe and easy way to start off a talk. Instead of worrying about "What will I say?", you just have to read the title, thereby putting off the problem of whether you have anything of substance to say by... oh... a good ten to fifteen seconds or so.

A title slide is a useful crutch to deal with that initial moment of the talk. Some people need a simple way to overcome that initial hesitation –

and that's fine. I am in no way bashing crutches here; they're useful things. But the goal should always be to get rid of the crutch, rather than relying on it.

If you want to leave a title in, there are some alternatives to the title slide. Let the moderator read your title. Or, if you feel you must have a title slide, don't read it out directly – just talk about your subject. Alternately, if you want to tell people the title because there is no moderator, just tell them – but don't make a text slide of it. I am convinced, though, that the best solution is to forget about introducing a title and just tell people your story in most cases. And leave the lights up for a few seconds so that your audience can see your face.

Outline slides

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2011/06/zen-of-presentations-part-42-outlines.html>

Outline slides are a waste of time. By definition, they contain no information that will not be found somewhere else in the talk. Worse, people usually narrate those slides, tediously plodding through each point.

For scientific talks, outlines are even more useless because *almost every talk has the same structure*. People structure their talks the same way they structure their scientific papers: Introduction. Methods. Results. Discussion. If your outline isn't substantially different than that, leave it out. Putting an outline up with those headings advertises your lack of imagination.

Why be redundant? Why repeat yourself? Why say the same thing over and over again?

Yet not only do I regularly see these sinkholes when I attend scientific conferences, some of my colleagues *insist* their students include them.

An outline is a planning tool. Outlines are useful in preparing a talk. You don't need to show it once the planning is over, however. You don't need to see an outline for a talk any more than you need to see the blueprints for a building you're walking around in. You don't need to see the storyboards for a movie you're watching. You don't need to see the rough sketches of a painting.

The problem might be that instructors want students to create a plan for their talk. The easiest way for instructors to ensure that happens is to make students "show their work" by including an outline slide. It forces the student to plan, which is good. It's less work for the instructor, because he or she can just tick it off during the presentation, which is good. But the cost is the student has learned a horrible habit that makes *nobody else in the audience happy*.

My colleagues are great, but sometimes I'd like to give 'em *such* a smack.

Down in front

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2011/09/zen-of-presentations-part-45-down-in.html>

You often have to give presentations in rooms where the floors are flat, the room is full, and the projection screens are *always* too low. If you're not sitting in the front row, your view is likely to be clocked by the heads of people seating in front of you.

At one meeting I attended, the screens were too low in many of the rooms, and people noticed and remarked upon it.

I knew this... and I blew it.

Because the organizers of the conference were adamant that presentations needed to be able to run in PowerPoint 1997 format, I ended up with multiple versions of my slides. I had one done in PowerPoint 2010 with some of the graphic effects and typefaces I wanted.



In retrospect, I was *stupid* to show this slide.¹ About 20% of the slide is taken up with the title, pushing the image, *which is what I want people*

¹ Crayfish photo in slides by Mike Bok on Flickr; used under a Creative Commons license. (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/mikebok/5708127082/in/photostream/>)

to see, further down so it's more likely to be blocked by someone's head.

I had another that was PowerPoint 1997 compatible, with almost no text, because I was not sure if the fonts would show correctly, as not every computer has the same fonts installed. I should have used that one, because the slide would have looked more like this:



The image is bigger, and shows more of what I wanted people to see. I'd okay with the first one if I knew I was in a room with stadium seating and everyone having clear eye-lines. But I wasn't.

Sadly, you can probably only count on the top half, or maybe two thirds, of your slides being consistently and clearly visible to all. Don't put anything important in that bottom half or third; someone might not be able to see it. Better to start a new slide and put it at the top.

The Gore method

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2008/01/zen-of-presentations-part-15-gore.html>

When I finally managed to watch *An Inconvenient Truth*, I wanted to try to figure out what made it so effective, because I'd heard so much about it.

The number one lesson and reason for its success, in my mind, is this:

Make what you're talking about concrete. Make it real and tangible.

Climate change has got to be one of the most abstract subjects imaginable. It covers thousands of years of data, highly complex computer simulations, and so on.

But Gore found something concrete to make the point: a devastating series of pictures showing snow and ice retreating in mountain range after mountain range. Suddenly, you're sitting thinking, "This is not something to worry about in the next two hundred years, it's been happening in front of my eyes."

And he shows the pictures right next to each other, not right after the other, so the images are within "eyespan," as Edward Tufte puts it, and can be immediately compared.

Whenever possible, show real physical objects, not just graphs. Our brains seem highly responsive to these. Just think of how many of our common expressions make abstract things understandable by referring to physical objects. To attempt to lead is to "step up to the plate." To set high ambitions is to "raise the bar." And so on.

Gore had lots of other advantages, too. Superb rehearsal, which showed in the perfect synchrony of his speech with the years ticking by in a timeline behind him. The biggest screens I've ever seen, allowing him to pull off the great visual point to get up on a cherry picker to indicate the predicted top of an exponential trend. And just excellent, low key, simple graphics. I think some those graphs could have been improved somewhat, but that is quibbling over details. *An Inconvenient Truth* is a fantastic presentation.

Consistency

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2011/05/zen-of-presentations-part-41.html>

I spend a fair amount of time reviewing students' PowerPoint presentations. The thing I probably spend the most time fixing is not their science, but their friggin' lists of bullet points.²

I often see bulleted lists like this:

- Readers distracted by content of a page when looking at its layout.
- Lorem Ipsum Looks Like Readable English.
- Now default for desktop publisher and web page editors

Two points have sentence casing; one has headline casing. Two have periods; one does not. For a list of short points, it doesn't matter if you put a period at the end of each point or not. But could you at least do it consistently?

To make matters worse, people often end up changing typefaces without realizing it. And point size. And sometimes colours. Longer pieces of text will be ragged right on one slide and justified on the next.

Consistency becomes harder as you add more slides. I often see a series of slides with the title containing some abbreviation of "continued". But sometimes it will be "Con't", sometimes "cont", then "Con't.", followed by "(con't)". I think I have seen every permutation of four letters and punctuation marks that it is possible to make.

Maintaining consistency becomes downright treacherous when you are creating presentations with several pieces of software. For instance, you might use Verdana as a typeface throughout your PowerPoint slides... but then forget that your Excel chart has the axes labelled in Arial.

Does anyone notice? For scientific or technical presentations, the answer is almost certainly, "Yes." The audience is going to be filled with people whose livelihood depends on obsessing over details.

² I try to tell them to get rid of all those damn lists that everyone hates, but they're all too scared. Wusses.

You want your audience to believe that you are someone who cares about details. Being consistent in your typography and slide design shows you are paying attention.

Pick a style and stay with it!

Symbology

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2011/09/zen-of-prsentations-part-47-you-need.html>

The letter “X” is not a multiplication symbol. Not in its uppercase form, and not in its lowercase form, either. A multiplication sign looks like this: ×

A superscript letter “O” is not a degree sign. A degree looks like this: °

A lowercase “u” is not a lowercase Greek letter mu, better known as the SI symbol for “micro-”. That symbol looks like this: μ

And we can tell the difference.

I have seen these kinds of mistakes in documents, **and** slides, **and** posters, many times. These mistakes show that you don’t know how to use your tools. That is the definition of amateur. And wouldn’t you rather look like a professional than an amateur?

Never apologize

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2011/09/zen-of-presentations-part-46-if-you-say.html>

There are certain phrases that you never plan to say during a presentation. When talking out loud, though, they can sneak out in a moment of uncontrolled honesty.

“This slide isn’t very clear, but...”

If you know that your slide is no good, *why are you forcing me to look at it?*

Apologizing for a slide might have been acceptable in the days of 35 mm film, where you couldn’t see the results until the film was actually developed. But we are living in the digital age, where high quality previews are immediate and photo editing software is everywhere.

You should always show the best image possible. Sometimes, that best image might not be so hot, but you should say, “This is the best available image.” Because that tells the audience that you respect their attention, and you put in your best effort to track down or make the clearest graphic you could.

Another phrase to listen for is, “This slide is to remind me to tell you...”

No! Slides are *not* for reminding yourself of what you want to say. *Notes* are to remind you what you want to say. *Teleprompters* are to remind you what you want to say. Rehearsals are to make it so you don’t *need* reminders of what you want to say.

If you hear phrases like these coming out of your mouth, you know it’s time to change your talk.

Never apologize, never explain.

The talk itself

The worst mistake

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2007/12/zen-of-presentations-part-13-worst.html>

Never go over your allotted time when you're giving a talk. This is particularly an issue for people giving presentations at conferences, where your talk is just one small part of a much larger parade of presentations. If you go too long, you make everyone else late for the rest of the day.

If there are multiple tracks of presentations, the imperative to stay on time gets even greater. People will often move from one room to another, popping in to see one talk and then leaving to see another talk. If the schedule goes out of whack, you do a great disservice to the audience.

My rule of thumb is to aim for your talk to be about 80% of allotted time. Given a 15 minute talk? Aim for 12. Got a 50 minute talk? Aim for 40. That way, if you are delayed a little, you can still finish on time.

And how do you know how long your talk is? Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.

Nobody ever criticizes a talk for being too short. But having a talk that goes on too long – not knowing when to shut up – is the height of rudeness.

Cutting the cord

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2008/02/zen-of-presentations-part-17-cutting.html>

One of the most useful tools for anyone using slides on a computer screen is a good wireless remote. They free you from a lectern, allowing for a much more dynamic and mobile talk.

I've used a few different remotes, and they vary dramatically in their shape and feel. Some are wide, some are round, some are slender. Finding one with the right "feel" is probably a very personal thing. You should probably look to see if you can borrow some and test a few before buying. (Unfortunately, most remotes get stuck in those impossible to open packages, so you can't handle them.)

Similarly, another thing that you often can't see in the packages are how big the receiver that plugs into the USB port is. Again, these differ a lot from one to the other. My old one was quite wide and chunky, which typically meant that I needed a hub or a short extension cable to plug in anything else along with the remote. (Chunky, fat USB receivers seem to be a feature of pretty much every Targus remote, alas.) My new one not only has a smaller profile, but has a slot where the receiver fits into inside the remote itself, so the receiver is less likely to get lost.

Surprisingly, a feature I have yet to see (or perhaps I've seen once) is an integrated flash drive and radio plug-in. It would seem to me to be logical to combine these two so that you would only have one thing to plug into the USB port, not two.

Pretty much every remote has a laser pointer in it, but they can vary somewhat in terms of their brightness. They're almost all red, although I see green ones are just starting to become available. Green lasers are brighter, but they are trickier to find in stores, more expensive, and probably have fewer features.

Besides backwards and forwards, remote presenters have a wide range of other features.

The feature that attracted me to my new presenter is that it has a built-in timer. I've written before about how important it is to stay on time, and with this presenter, you almost have no excuse. When you start, you pick a time, and the remote vibrates when you have five minutes

left, and again at two minutes. Brilliant. It's not perfect – it only goes up in increments of 5 minutes, for example – but it's so useful that it's amazing that more remotes haven't copied this idea.

Some can act like a mouse, allowing you to move the cursor around screen. The ones I've tried, however, are so painful to navigate with that I would invariably walk back to the lectern and just use the mouse instead of trying to use the mouse mode in the remote. One from Targus that has a trackball (like old school Centipede!) that might be more manageable.

I've seen at least one remote that has a built-in voice recorder (Targus again). This might be an attractive feature, provided that you never put your remote down! I find that I occasionally set mine down to draw on a board or gesture with both hands. I've taken to recording my lectures for podcasting, so I think this might be another feature that could be built in more often.

Many do not have an off switch, which is fine if it sits on your desk. This is perhaps not so good if you travel, and have to stash it in luggage or other places where the buttons might get pressed accidentally.

Few have a battery indicator. Again, this is a nice feature of my new presenter. Many do not, potentially leaving you stuck without warning in the middle of a presentation. Most remotes will probably last for years on a single set of batteries, however.

And the list is nowhere near done! Can it start and end a presentation? Blank a screen? Control sound volume?

For something that is usually going to have a simple function – next slide, repeat until done – there are a lot of details to consider. Shopping around is definitely worth it.

Coping with anxiety

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2009/11/zen-of-presentations-part-27-coping.html>

I had a student in my office this week for advising, and I noted that she hadn't taken Biology Seminar, a required class for all our majors. She said she had been putting it off, and putting it off, and was deliberately taking it at the last possible time. She was absolutely terrified of giving a talk. Even as I was talking to her, I could see her getting wound up at the prospect of something that might be weeks, if not months, away.

Before getting to the advice, let me preface what I'm about to say with a general principle:

There is no virtue in suffering.

We often tend to treat that people who are genuinely anxious about presentation with little sympathy. People are told to keep suck it up and keep practicing. There is more than a little "You should suffer for your art" attitude out there.

If you are truly frantic about the prospect of speaking in public, why not make an appointment with your physician and see about getting a prescription drug to help with the anxiety?

I don't say this lightly. There's a reason that some drugs are only available by prescription, and only recommend this is as a last resort for extreme cases.

I know one person who had to give a lot of presentations, and hated every second. The stress was quite debilitating, so this individual got a prescription for a beta blocker, and took a pill before giving a talk. The talk I saw this person give was fine, and I'm convinced the audience wouldn't have known this person was dealing with high anxiety.

In most cases, you're better off practicing and learning the skill of presentation than getting medication. But not everyone is the same, and some people may need more help than practice and preparation alone can give.

The shirt on your back

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2009/11/zen-of-presentations-part-29-shirt-off.html>

Steve Jobs was good at presentations. Carmine Gallo wrote a whole book about him and his presentations. This [slideshow](#) says:

Steve Jobs can wear a black mock turtleneck, blue jeans, and running shoes because, quite simply, he has earned the right to dress anyway he wants. For most communicators, it's best to dress a little better than everyone in your audience.

I can't help but find the rationalization funny. Gallo spends the book looking at what makes one person a great speaker, but shies away from the possibility that maybe he was great partly *because* of how he dressed, not *in spite* of how he dressed.

Maybe people are responding to seeing someone they can relate to. Maybe people are responding to someone who is not relying on artifice. Maybe people are responding to seeing someone who is genuine.

Audiences crave authenticity. It's a driver behind the success of so-called "reality" shows or YouTube videos: people are looking for the unscripted, the immediate.

With too many presenters, you can tell their dress for their presentation is an act. A total put on. A sham. It's not real, it's not who they are, and they're not comfortable.

Soon after, I spotted [this post](#) by Kathy Reiffenstein on what to wear during a presentation. This also struck me as over-emphasizing formality and business wear, but I appreciated Chris Atherton's [response](#) to it:

Love how much of this is really about attention (yours and audience's).

Right. Be worried not so much about how you look as whether that look will distract you or the audience.

The “Grrrrr!” factor

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2009/12/zen-of-presentations-part-32-if-it.html>

You have a big presentation coming up, and you need something to help get yourself in the right mental zone. Something to bring up your “Grrrrrrr!” factor.

Buy or rent *Predator*.

The movie has a track record of making people achieve.

Case study #1. Two of the film’s stars have gone on to govern American states. Schwarzenegger in California, Ventura in Minnesota.

Case study #2. In 2000, the Essendon Bombers (of the Australian Football League) had the sort of year that sports teams dream about. They went an entire season all but undefeated, losing only one game and taking home the premiership. In 2001, they were having another fantastic start to their season and were widely tipped to go all the way to a second premiership.

Then, half-way through the season, they played the Brisbane Lions. The Bombers lost that game, were weakened the rest of the season, and they lost to the Lions again in the Grand Final. The advice coach Leigh Matthews gave to his players before the crucial first meeting?

He showed his team *Predator* and told them, “If it bleeds, we can kill it.”

Case study #3. In the back of the role-playing game supplement by *Way of the Crab* by author Rob Vaux wrote, “This book would never have been finished without the last 20 minutes of *Predator*.”

That’s one advantage of using a full laptop instead of a netbook: it’s more likely to have a DVD drive so you can watch that last reel of *Predator* in the break before your talk.

The Chinese run-through

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2007/11/zen-of-presentations-part-11-chinese.html>

Want to test that you really know your talk? Do the entire talk out loud as fast as you possibly can.

This is a trick I learned from actors, who often called it a Chinese run-through. Or Italian run-through. Or [Insert name of language other than the one you speak] run-through. It's typically one of the last stages of rehearsal.

You should sound like one of those frantic radio ads for demolition derby Sunday or the old FedEx ad.

It becomes incredibly obvious where you don't know your stuff, where the transitions are weak. And talking as fast as you can gets your energy levels up. So do the Chinese run through it as near to the actual presentation as you actually can.

Funny or die

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2012/01/zen-of-presentations-part-48-funny-or.html>

To hear a lot of people talk, you'd think telling a joke was as deadly as juggling a chainsaw.

Presenters are often told, "Don't try to be funny." This is bizarre to me, given that humour is one of the most often cited features of a good presentation. The thinking seems to be that failed humour is a dangerous thing to a speaker. What is at risk when you use humour? People might not laugh.

There are two responses to that. First, "people not laughing" is not dangerous. It might deflate your ego a bit. But it's not as though if a joke lands wrong, it could take your hand *clean off!*

And if you hadn't told the joke? People *definitely* will not laugh. You have the same outcome with or without the joke.

Second, just because people do not laugh out loud at your joke does not necessarily mean they are not enjoying themselves. Sometimes they may just smile. Their smiles may not be big grins. Not everyone in the room may smile. It can be difficult to pick up those cues that people are enjoying the humour, particularly if you're in a big room, or a dark room, and so on. Even if you're not getting the audible laughs, you can still have a room full of people who are much more pleased with your presentation than if you didn't make the effort.

If you tell a joke and it doesn't work, and you panic, that is not a problem that comes from telling a joke. That is a problem that comes from **poor preparation**. Lack of preparation can make a talk brittle, and a presenter unable to cope with even slight deviations from plan.

If you're not comfortable with humour in the sense of telling jokes, think of humour as used in the phrase "good humoured." Even if you don't deliberately say funny things, you could at least smile.

The caged tiger

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2009/03/zen-of-presentations-part-25-caged.html>

In photographer James Duncan's blog entry called, [Dear Speakers](#), about half of his eight entries can be boiled down to, "Stop moving around so much!" As a photographer, you can certainly understand why he wants people to stay put: it makes it much easier to make the photo.

As a presenter, I am probably guilty of the "caged tiger" problem at times. I like to move. I like to present with energy. I like to try to look to different parts of the audience or classroom. At some point, though, you cross a threshold where that energy just looks abnormal, like a big cat looping around the same track in its enclosure in a zoo.

You have to be aware enough of your conditions to figure out if, or how much, you can move. Some stages have very definite light and dark spots; a recent talk by Robert Ballard at our university reminded me of this. His talk was lit by several stage lights, with some areas being very bright, and quickly fading to very dark. Ballard rarely stayed in the light, and it was bothersome. Some rooms, however, have very uniform lights, so this may not be a problem.

The "caged tiger" look also becomes less of a problem if you can simply remember to pause occasionally. It's the constant movement along the same path that is most distracting.

For many presentations, there is simply a sweet spot on the stage where you can see the audience, the audience can see you, you can reach the lectern, but are not concealed by it. Find that spot before the talk. Then you're less likely to go prowling for it during the talk.

Take a bow

<http://neurodojo.blogspot.com/2008/01/zen-of-presentations-part-15-take-bow.html>

I was reading a book on magic once, and the author said it was important when you finished an illusion to bow. Now, he immediately elaborated that he didn't literally mean "bend at the waist." He meant that you should do something to indicate clearly that the trick was done. It was also important not to immediately start the next one, but to create a space for the audience to show their appreciation – to applaud.

Because people's attention may drift, it's also helpful to cue them that the talk is coming to a close. Say something like, "In conclusion..." or "To sum up..." or "The take home message is..."

Several bad ways to end a presentation include:

- To just stop talking. Definitely the worst way to go, as people are unsure of whether they should listen or clap.
- Ending with a perfunctory, "That's it," or "That's all." This is usually thrown in as a desperate sign to the audience after the above method (just not talking) fails.
- Anything mentioning questions (as in the linked blog post), as people don't know if they should stick up their hands or clap.

My typical way to end is to put up an acknowledgments slide, which I do not read, but leave it up during questions. Then, I say, "I thank these people for help with my science, and I thank you for your attention."

By thanking the audience, you create a chance for them to say, "You're welcome," with their applause.

Colophon

This ebook was created in Microsoft Word (2010 version and later). The body text is set in Calibri, and the headings are set in [Calluna](#).

What people are saying

“A fantastic set of public speaking tips” – Alex Wild (@Myrmecos) on [Twitter](#)

“#nice” – Julie Dirksen (@usablelearning) on [Twitter](#)

“Really excellent tips” – Uta Frith (@utafrith) on [Twitter](#)

“Really handy tips, will come in useful for a seminar presentation” – @schizometric on [Twitter](#)

“Recommended” – Jeremy Fox on [Oikos blog](#)

“An awesome e-book of presentation tips” – Jacquelyn Gill (@JacquelynGill) on [Twitter](#)

“Love the eBook! Awesome.” – Bora Zivcovik (@BoraZ) on [Twitter](#)

“Love how @DoctorZen ends his ebook on presentation tips with blurbs from Twitter! Excellent advice within.” – John Hawks (@johnhawks) on [Twitter](#) (And thus, the circle is complete.)

“Just read first page of ebook on presenting and already like it” – Pleuni Pennings (@pleunipennings) on [Twitter](#)

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