

THE FLOOR IS YOURS

**THE FLOOR
IS YOURS
BECAUSE LIFE
IS TOO SHORT
FOR BAD
PRESENTATIONS**

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Better presentations: are they really necessary?

THE PENICILLIN PRESENTATION

In 1928, Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin, the first antibiotic, more or less by chance. Although in this case 'discover' is relative. Fleming was a notoriously bad communicator and did not like revealing too much about his research. Consequently, the results were published in an obscure paper that was hardly read and the miraculous medicine remained unused in his laboratory. Had things stayed this way, the discovery might never have become known.

Ten years later, a group of scientists stumbled across Fleming's publication. After a further two years of study, they finally understood its full implications. Penicillin could fight bacterial infection and potentially save millions of lives. Unfortunately, for many people this fantastic news came too late because the Second World War had already broken out. The production of penicillin only really took off when the Americans joined the war and pumped huge amounts of money into its development. It was not until D-Day in 1944 that there was enough penicillin available to treat every wounded soldier.

It's a crying shame that Fleming didn't go public with his discovery earlier. Since penicillin has been on the market, it has saved an estimated 83 million lives. But if Fleming had communicated his research more effectively, mass

production could probably have been started before the war, saving millions more.

Perhaps you think your project or research isn't all that important. Fleming also had no idea that his discovery would save so many people. It is precisely to discover the potential impact of what you are doing that you need to communicate it properly. How can you expect other researchers and disciplines to get the most out of your work if they've never even heard of it?

We are living in a society with a long list of challenges that urgently need solving. Problems like climate change, migration, digitalization, radicalization and unemployment are too complex to be dealt with from a single angle of approach. We need to work across disciplines in a process of open collaboration between scientists, policy-makers, entrepreneurs, social organizations and ordinary citizens.

And you can't do this if everyone insists on using technical language or locking themselves away in a laboratory – like Fleming. So let's hear from you!

TALK TO YOUR INNER EGO

'Making the world a better place' and 'saving human lives' are unquestionably socially relevant reasons for giving better presentations, but this doesn't necessarily get you very far in personal terms. After all, 'making the world a better place' is going to look a bit odd on your CV!

So it is important to focus on the reasons for giving better presentations that mean something for you directly. What difference can a strong presentation make for your career? It can result in three things: more support, new ideas and/or more funding.

More support: not everyone is convinced of the importance of your project or research. The more support you get, the stronger your position. Imagine that budget cuts need to be made. You wouldn't want your project to be axed, would you? A good presentation can make people aware of the importance

of what you are doing and can help to create support for it.

New ideas: questions or comments from the public or discussions afterwards can sometimes throw up surprising ideas and angles of approach that you might never have thought of yourself. This can sometimes lead to new projects, partnerships and breakthroughs. A lot of multidisciplinary research has come about because of ‘ideas having sex with each other’, as the British writer and scientist Matt Ridley puts it.

More funding: when people believe in your project and are confident you can bring it to a successful conclusion, sometimes a few minutes is enough to persuade them to support you financially. Funding organizations often organize pitch competitions where a jury awards a cash prize or a grant to the person with the most convincing presentation.

Job offer proves the power of a successful presentation

Professor John Creemers experienced at first hand the impact of a good presentation:

‘When I was a lecturer, I was invited to speak at a Gordon Research Conference. All my colleagues were there. During my presentation, I could sense the audience’s engagement. They were hanging on my every word! My biggest rival – someone who never quotes me on anything – came up to me afterwards to offer his personal congratulations. Someone else asked me if I would like to apply for a job as departmental chairman in a top institution where he was the director, a job that was normally only open to professors (which I wasn’t at that time).’

(John Creemers decided not to accept the offer, but this still shows how a presentation could completely change your life.)

IF THEY'RE ASLEEP, THEY CAN'T HELP YOU

Is your presentation room a bedroom?

A presentation can win you more support, ideas or funding, but only if your public understand your message or are at least paying attention to it.

Do you watch the people in the room when you are giving a presentation? Look at David, for example. That's him there in the fourth row, on the far left. The one playing with his smartphone all the time. He's more interested in reading his e-mails than in listening to you. And what about Emma, right in the middle of the back row? She's fallen asleep! What a pity! You can't really expect much support from her.

The fact that Emma has dozed off isn't necessarily your fault. Presentation rooms often have that effect on people. Why? Because the average presentation room is typified by:

- dimmed lighting;
- the monotone voice of a single speaker at the front;
- a complete lack of activity or interaction with the public.

In other words, most presentation rooms have a lot in common with bedrooms, which are also often characterized by soft voices in the distance, subdued lighting and little or no activity. So it's hardly surprising if half your audience fall asleep before you get to the end of what you want to say. And equally unsurprising that you don't get the support, ideas or funding you need. Sleepers can't help you.

So if you have any influence on the matter, this is our first tip: reduce the bedroom level of the room where you are giving your presentation. Pull back the curtains, turn the lights on, open a window. A little light and air can do wonders to liven up your listeners.

'But with all that light, they won't be able to see my slides.' Good point – and we will be looking at the problem of slides later in the book. For now, suffice it to say that what you say as a speaker – and how you say it – is much more

important than what you show. Besides, most of today's projectors are powerful enough to give a clear reproduction even in strong daylight.

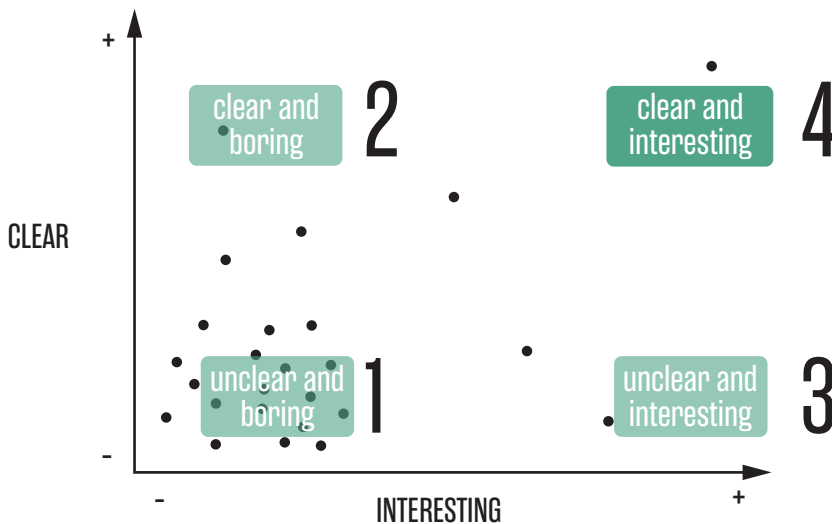
But it's not all the fault of the room

Don't kid yourself: sleepy audiences are not all the fault of the presentation room. It would be convenient to put the blame on something like this, but your public's lack of attention almost certainly also has something to do with you and your presentation.

You have probably been at presentations in well-lit and well-aired rooms where your own attention has wandered. Perhaps you start to think about the shopping you have to do after work, or the report on your desk you still need to read, or the cable you urgently need to fix in the model for tomorrow's demonstration. You do your best to focus on the speaker, but he or she keeps on losing you, time after time. After a while, you begin to ask yourself what you are actually doing there... Recognize the feeling?

WHAT TYPE OF PRESENTATION DO YOU GIVE?

We can divide presentations into four categories and we can illustrate this on a graph. The horizontal axis shows how interesting a presentation is. The vertical axis shows how clear the message is. If we combine both criteria, we arrive at our four categories:



Most presentations are unclear and boring

1. Unclear and boring. Most presentations are in the bottom left corner. They bore you to tears and at the end you are none the wiser. This type of presentation is a waste of time for all concerned: for the presenter, who worked so hard to get it ready, and for the audience, who don't understand what the presenter is trying to say. This is when the laptops and smartphones start to appear, as people desperately look for something – anything – to distract their attention.

2. Clear and boring. This time you understand the purpose of the presentation, but the delivery is so boring that the message leaves you cold. This is the kind of presentation where you want to get away as quickly as possible: you know what's coming next and you don't want to hear the same old pitch

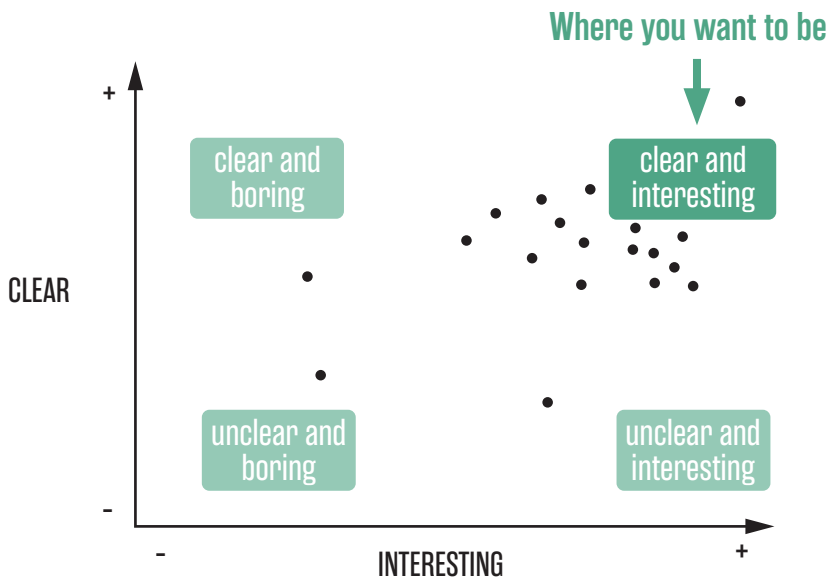
for the umpteenth time. With this type of presentation you will often see people pretend their cell phone is ringing, so they can leave the room to answer it. They rarely come back.

3. Unclear and interesting. The speaker is an entertainer. An artist as well: his colourful slides could fill the walls of any art gallery! Even so, at the end of the day you still wonder what the presentation was all about. This speaker is a master of form – but not of content. What a pity!

4. Clear and interesting. This is where we want our presentations to be, in the top right corner. The public hangs on your every word and knows exactly what you mean. Form and content are perfectly matched. Hallelujah!

So how can you get yourself into this top right quadrant? How can you make presentations that are both interesting and clear? And how can you do it as painlessly as possible, with no fuss, no nerves and without falling flat on your face?

Answering questions like these is the purpose of this book.



Our aim? Clear and interesting presentations!

WHAT WILL YOU FIND IN THIS BOOK?

To help you improve your presentations, we have put together a toolkit containing three boxes.



STORY How can you tell a complex story in a clear, structured and simple way? The tools we provide will allow you to make a presentation with a strong message.

SHOW How can you attract your public's attention and keep it to the end? We will explain the best way to build up an interesting presentation.

SLIDES How can you make clear and attractive slides if you're not a designer? No problem! We will show you.

The tools we give you in this book will teach you all you need to know to make clear, interesting and visually appealing presentations that will get you more support, ideas and funding. And that's not just better for you. It's also great for your public – and the world!

HOW CAN YOU BEST USE THIS BOOK?

You can, of course, read this book from cover to cover. That will probably give you the most coherent picture. But you can also dip into it anywhere, if you need to find an answer to a specific problem. At some time or other, the researchers and professionals we have worked with over the years probably had the same questions as you. So the likelihood of finding the right solution in the following pages is high. Still didn't find what you were looking for? At the end, we will give you details of where you can contact us, and we will be delighted to help you further.

Is everything we have written set in stone? Is it the Ultimate Truth? Of course not. There is no such thing as the perfect formula for the perfect presentation. You will need to find out for yourself what works best for you. Start with just a few of our most relevant tips and try to work them into your next presentation. Then add a few more each time. Don't try to do everything at once. That's like going to the gym and spending an hour on each piece of equipment during your first visit! The result? You can't get out of bed the next day! The best training schedule is a spread training schedule: give a presentation each month and focus on one new aspect from the book each time. By the end of the year you will be amazed how much progress you have made.

Sometimes during your reading you will probably think, 'Fun idea but not really appropriate for my project or research' or 'They'd never allow that in my organization'. When that happens, stop and think. More often than not, things that are 'not applicable' or 'not possible' simply require a little more inventiveness or daring to make use of them.

Every piece of advice in this book is useful. Every tip will enhance your presentations. Even if you only use some of them, your presentations will still be better than the rest. In 1906, the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto put forward his famous Pareto Principle: 20% of input is responsible for 80% of output. In keeping with this 80/20 rule, we believe that if you apply just 20% of this book your presentations will improve by 80% – and that's a serious improvement! And if you apply the whole book, your public will be mesmerized – guaranteed!



STORY

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KEEP YOUR LAPTOP CLOSED FOR A WHILE

You are asked to give a presentation. What is your first move? Thinking about your approach? Drafting a structure? Collecting relevant material? Probably not. Most people's first step is to open PowerPoint (or Keynote, Prezi or whatever software you use). But this leads on to a fundamental problem. Instantly, the software demands that you fill in the first slide ('click to add title'). So you do it. But then you are immediately presented with the first bullet point ('click to add text'). So you do that as well. And on it goes.

After a while, you discover that you have completed slide after slide without having any real master plan in mind. If you look closely, you will see that these slides are just an unstructured succession of texts and images with no real common thread. Sure, you thought about what you were typing, but did you really think about it properly? Do you really need to discuss all the things you have included? Does all the content support what you really want to say? There's a good chance that after this 'brain dump' you will need to alter, scrap and add things. This takes a lot of extra time. Okay, you might eventually end up with something that at least has a degree of structure but not always. That's why we say: keep your laptop closed for a while. Don't fill in any slides at this early stage. The process of thought that we are going to suggest in this STORY part of the book is something best set down on paper. Or in a word processor. But not in presentation software like PowerPoint.

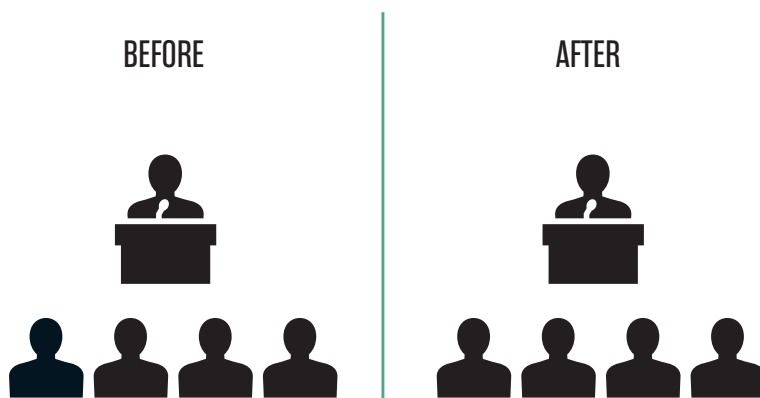
So what exactly do you need to think about? The key questions are: what do you want to achieve with your presentation; who is your public; what do you want to tell them; and what don't you want to tell them? Once you have done this kind of mental exercise a couple of times, you probably won't need more than five or ten minutes to complete it in the future. In the long run, it will save you a lot of time. Your presentation will be well structured first time around and will only contain the things it needs to contain. No more, no less. And the good thing about doing your brainstorming in advance? You can do it anywhere. You don't need to be behind your desk or at a computer. You can do it on a train, in a pub, in a hammock or even while you are out jogging.

So keep your laptop closed for a while.

IMPACT

THE PURPOSE OF A PRESENTATION... IS THAT A PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTION?

‘Why are you giving a presentation?’ It sounds like the most obvious question in the world. But the most common answer is ‘um...er...’, followed by stony silence. For most people, presentations are just a part of the job. Something we do as a matter of routine because someone asked us, because we are the person with the right knowledge, because we have to... Presentations are something you just do, almost without thinking. Aren’t they?



*Does your public look the same before and after your presentation? Hopefully not!
What change do you want to bring about?*

Why is the question about what you want to achieve with your presentation so important? Because if you don’t know what you want to get out of your presentation, you won’t know if it has been successful. In many cases, your aim will be to get more support, ideas and/or funding. But this won’t happen by itself. You first need to bring about a change in your public. And by this we mean ‘change’ in the broadest sense of the word. Perhaps you want them to remember a particular message. Or to take action on the things you have said. Or to support your proposals with others. Whatever it is, you always need to start with the same question: ‘What change do I want to bring about in my public?’ That is the purpose of your presentation.