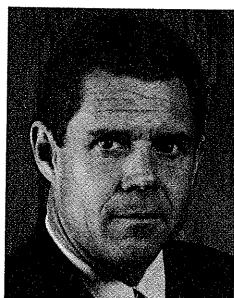


# Five Ways to Improve Your Presentations Now

*Enhance your next scientific presentation with these helpful hints.*

By Michael Alley



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Because attending a conference requires such a significant investment of time and money, as a conference speaker you should ensure that your presentations deliver valuable content. Often, just a few adjustments can turn a presentation of seemingly little worth into one of deep value.

## 1 Focus on the essence of your work.

If you try to present everything you've done in your research, you may very well end up communicating nothing. Rather than overwhelming your audience with every detail in the paper, focus on the essence of your work. The best conference presentations consist of a single storyline with one or two main assertions that are well supported. If you're worried that the audience will ask about specific procedures or derivations, then simply include those details in back-up slides you can access during the Q&A period. In a PowerPoint slideshow, you can quickly jump to a particular slide by punching in the slide number.

## 2 Reveal your passion for the subject.

The best speakers in science and engineering were passionate about their work: Linus Pauling, Gertrude Cori, Richard Feynman. And with good reason—if you don't show that you care about your subject, little hope exists that your audience will either, especially if your audience has listened to a slate of other presentations. Not every excellent speaker reveals his or her passion with the same intensity of a Pauling. For instance, Jane Goodall presents her work in a soothing voice. Still, Goodall is an engaging speaker, and it is her earnestness that makes her so.

## 3 Channel your nervous energy in a positive direction.

Many speakers mistakenly allow their nervousness to pull down their presentations. In the days before your presentation, whenever you feel nervous, shift your focus to the audience. What do they know about your topic? What would engage them about

your topic? What biases might they have against your results? Thinking about your audience will serve your presentation—thinking about your nervousness will not. To combat nervousness on the day of the presentation, arrive early to the room, make sure the equipment is working, and then go out to meet your audience. Find out why they came to your session. If appropriate, during the presentation, mention one or two audience members. Thinking so much about your audience will displace the nervous feelings about yourself. Finally, if you begin the presentation and your nervous energy starts to seep out into shaking hands and dancing feet, try scrunching your toes. Doing so will allow you to release your excess energy without distracting your audience.

## 4 Begin each slide with a succinct sentence.

If slides are the appropriate medium for your presentation's content, then rise above the mind-numbing defaults of PowerPoint. The single most important default to challenge is the one calling for a short phrase headline. My own research shows that audiences understand and retain significantly more information when the headline of each slide is a one- or two-line sentence, starting in the upper left corner, that states the main assertion of the slide. If you cannot come up with a headline, then cut the slide. Most conference presentations have too many slides, which leads to a frenetic pace. In conference presentations, aim for 1.5 to 2 minutes per slide.

## 5 Make connections, not bullets.

Bullet lists do not show connections between details, and showing connections in your evidence is critical to making your presentation persuasive. Instead of writing a boring bullet list on each slide, create a visual representation of the supporting details. That representation might be a photograph, a diagram, a linked series of images, or text blocks connected by arrows. Many excellent examples and templates for such slides can be found at the site "Design of Presentation Slides" ([writing.eng.vt.edu/slides.html](http://writing.eng.vt.edu/slides.html)) hosted by Virginia Tech.