

# Presentation Advice from a Geriatric Charisma-Challenged Professor

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At conference sessions, too-frequent violations of three basic rules of mass communications guarantee boring presentations. Too many students, faculty and business professionals, frequently violate these rules resulting audience attention going elsewhere. At the conference, see how many in the audience are on their phones or doing something else.

## 1P > 10<sup>3</sup>W

P=picture; W=words  
"One picture is greater than 1000 words."

This common maxim says that your slides are the illustrations. As illustrations, they should not be filled with words. You want the audience to listen to what you are saying instead of being distracted by reading. If someone can just read your slides and know everything you said, you wasted everyone's time with a face-to-face meeting. If someone can listen from the next room and know your entire presentation, you wasted your time making slides. If you have too many words on screen, the audience will be reading instead of listening.

Rule #1:  $1P > 10^3W$

Rule #2:  $U \neq TA$

Rule #3:  $NU \neq D$

Use words to help your illustrations, not distract from them.

Common textbook guidance states that seven words are optimal for good outdoor displays that should depend on illustrations to carry the message. The more you try to say, the less you convey as people are driving past and (we hope) paying attention to traffic. For presentations, the audience should not be distracted by reading. Depending on too many words, the audience would read ahead of your talk, figure there is nothing extra, then turn their attention elsewhere.

Seeing this formula for the first time with journalists and people holding communications degrees, we all laughed. Ingenious, we thought. Coming home, I eagerly showed it to an Engineering professor who, instead of laughing, said "It's wrong" as he wrote the "correct" formula with these letters that I learned meant something specific in his work

that is different than pictures and words. That brings me to the second rule.

## U ≠ TA

U=you; TA=target audience  
"You are not the target audience."

It means that you can't assume. What you think is a killer joke can fall flat. Even sex appeals or who looks sexy are not a consistent universal value.

This rule is often misunderstood. It is not what has to be simplified, bowdlerized or needing a *vulgarectomy*. It is not just an issue of age or gender or other demographic differences, though they do matter. Nor can this be reduced to a matter of potentially offending someone, because that is almost unavoidable. As you travel to different parts of the country or the world, unexpected differences will surprise you. As you get older, you will discover simple terms or phrases acquire unexpected, potentially offensive, additional meanings as younger members of the audience giggle that you said it.

The key is empathy, not ethnocentrism. What is

obvious to you might not be to them.

A simple example is gratuitous name dropping of citations in slides saying only "Larry, Darryl and Darryl (1990)" without elaboration. With that limited notation, few would know what they reference. Those familiar with the topic don't need them. Those unfamiliar would just be perplexed, unless the presentation includes a full reference list handout for everyone (which no one ever does).

At a more basic level, what looks great on your computer monitor might fail when projected on a screen. Most likely, anything smaller than 36 point type would not be readable to anyone beyond the first two rows, even though 18 point sans serif is the default PowerPoint font for text. Web designers still have not caught on that many of their site visitors will come in by a mix of computers, tablets or phones. Advertising agencies usually show their work to clients on state-of-the-art extra-large screens that dominate the room, ignoring that significant parts of their audiences will be watching on something older or smaller.

### **NU ≠ D**

NU=Not You; D=dunce  
"Being different from you doesn't mean audience members are dunces."

Maybe it would help if you spent a minute remembering what it was like as a student, taking a course, sitting in a classroom during a lecture. You probably had a class where the instructor would show a series of word-filled slides, and every line of each slide would be read out loud. Anyone who attended a college or university in the past twenty years had a class like that. And yet, no student in a class like that ever asked the teacher: "Why do you think we can't read?"

It is perplexing that anyone who had this experience considers doing the same thing in their own presentations. At worst, a presenter uses a laser pointer to highlight each word as they read it.

For an interesting presentation, presume audience intelligence. Don't make your slides the script. Don't read slides out loud. If you must have a slide with words, be terse. Your audiences won't be illiterate, or so I hope. Don't read to the audience as if they are children at bedtime. The people at your presentation are not idiots, but you are one if you feel a need to read to them.

It is a given that some people in the audience might not be as interested in the topic as you, especially if it is part of a job interview. There is no doubt that they don't have your knowledge level. After all,

that's why you are making a presentation. However, that doesn't make the audience a collection of deranged, dim-witted, mentally deficient dunces.

### **And so I end**

It is a safe bet that everyone reading this has witnessed presentations guilty of all of the bad practices I've described here. You should follow the same pattern for your conference or classroom presentations only if you personally found those experiences interesting and not a time to check for messages on your phone.

### **NOTE:**

This is drawn from a presentation prepared-but-never-shown to new instructor orientations or doctoral student symposia. The presentation's expanded long form storyboard is available at <http://webhome.auburn.edu/~rotfehj/PowerPointCrimes.pdf>

