

## 8 SMARTER PRESENTATIONS AND SHORTER MEETINGS

### BEGIN ALL MEETINGS WITH A DOCUMENT (PAPER OR ELECTRONIC) AND STUDY HALL

Nonfiction meetings should begin with a silent reading of a briefing paper, narrative document, technical report – not a slide deck and bullet points. A document (paper or electronic) should be 2 to 6 pages long, written in sentences, with appropriate images and data displays. **Do not send out your stuff in advance, people won't read it.**

Give people the document as they arrive or sign in, saying **'Read this, then we'll talk about it.'** Meetings with several topics may have several silent reading periods. Study hall is serious, 20% to 50% of total meeting time. **Audience members read 2 or 3 times faster than you can talk.** The document is in hand, everyone in the audience reads with their own eyes, at their own pace, their own choice of what to read closely. In slide presentations, viewers have no control over pace and sequence as the presenter clicks through a deck – viewers must sit in the dark waiting for the diamonds in the swamp.

**Presenters, you have not lost control,** you prepared the document in the first place.

Study hall is a wonderful time for presenters: people showed up, they're all reading your stuff, and they're not looking at you. If someone in study hall peeks at their email instead of reading, gently glare at them; the purpose of gathering together in meetings is total concentration on the content at hand. Document-based presentations naturally handle questions by answering them further down in the document. **Your job is to provide intellectual leadership, which is why you are making the presentation.**

Decks are easier to prepare than documents, however. **Documents require coherence, thinking, sentences.** But convenience in preparing decks harms the content and the audience. Optimizing presenter convenience is selfish, lazy, and worst of all, replaces thinking. Steve Jobs saying:

*I hate the way people use **slide presentations instead of thinking.***

***People who know what they're talking about don't need PowerPoint.***

Jeff Bezos on Amazon meetings:

*We have study hall at the beginning of our meetings. Staff meetings at Amazon begin with 30 minutes of silent reading. The traditional corporate meeting starts with a presentation. Somebody gets up in the front of the room and presents a PowerPoint presentation, some type of slide show. In our view you get very little information, you get bullet points. This is easy for the presenter, but difficult for the audience. And so instead, all our meetings are structured around a 6 page narrative memo.*

**This presentation method, beginning with a document and study hall, has a practical guarantee: meetings will be smarter and more efficient, the audience more active, and meetings 10% to 20% shorter. None ever wished them longer.**

## CONTENT AND CREDIBILITY

Your audience seeks to learn *What is the substantive content? What are the reasons to believe the presenter?* To improve presentations, improve the quality, relevance, integrity of your content. Provide a credible document, a coherent series of reasons, facts, data. If your numbers are boring, get better numbers. Documents model information better than decks. Data paragraphs are smarter than sentences. Sentences smarter than bullet lists. Evaluating content problems: a sure sign of trouble is an inability to write a paragraph explaining

What the problem is.

Why it is relevant, why anyone should care.

What you're going to do to solve the problem.

Credibility derives from your reputation, data sources, comparing various viewpoints, demonstrating (briefly) mastery of detail, use of quotations from experts in the field, avoiding business school/military/hi-tech jargon buzz words. **A good way to have credibility with your colleagues is not to have lied to them last week.** Your credibility depends on a continuing reputation for honest communication *and* getting it right.

Presentation documents should provide *quotations from experts* (mention their credentials) on your topic. This helps the audience learn technical jargon as used correctly by experts, and suggests to the audience that you know about what's going on in your field. Experts can express strong views, say things presenters can't possibly say, and demonstrate what intellectual leadership and analytical thinking look like. Quotes gets your presentation out of your own precious voice and into the voices of experts. Use quotes with specific relevance to the topic at hand, not faux-inspirational cheerleading.

The fundamental quality control mechanism for presentation integrity is documentation. **Authors must be named, sponsors revealed, interests and agendas unveiled, measurements verified.** Documentation is a necessary but not sufficient sign that a report was constructed with some care and integrity. Deceptive documentation may disqualify presenters from their job, as happened in medical research. **Every paragraph, every visualization should provide reasons to believe.** Presenters should provide data downlinks with a clean code-book. Fear that others may look at your data encourages getting it right in the first place.

## THINKING ABOUT YOUR AUDIENCE

Think the best you possibly can of your audience, behave with the greatest civility you can muster. **You should be happy that people showed up to your presentation.** A common error in audience research is to underestimate the audience, a big mistake. **Instead have endless respect for your audience – after all, they were smart enough to attend your talk, read your document.** **Do not spin, pander, or dumb things down.** Your job is to get it right, be honest, make everyone smarter. All three.

### AFTER STUDY HALL, TIME TO TALK

Now the benefits of a document and study hall repay your work. You didn't have to read slides aloud, rush through, or worry about the audience not laughing at your jokes. **After 2 to 6 pages of reading, your audience knows a lot.** When you talk, do not merely repeat what they read. Instead, dig deeper and discuss relevant parts of our document, saying, 'In the third paragraph of the budget statement, we don't have a consensus.' Your audience turns to their document, you show the budget statement on the screen, perhaps even give them *another handout*, this one about budgetary specifics.

### PRACTICE YOUR PRESENTATION: REHEARSAL IMPROVES PERFORMANCE

A grand truth about human behavior is that rehearsal improves performance. If you have a diplomatic colleague from whom you can take criticism, have them comment during your rehearsal. A live performance or a rehearsal video will ruthlessly reveal incoherence, nervous habits, and place holders *like um um and so like as I mentioned earlier so I mean like you know um like*. Your audience might appear to be taking notes, but no, they're keeping score, even betting: "3 likes in the next minute, for a latte." Identifying problems leads to eliminating them. Rehearsals are difficult and nervous-making, but your presentations will be better. Don't let rehearsal-nerve deflect you.

### SHOW UP EARLY. FINISH EARLY.

Show up early to your own presentation. As people arrive, get them started on study hall; have the document ready at each seat or screen, and a slide saying in a gracious way 'read this now', 'don't touch your cell phone here'. Showing up early may deflect minor problems (eg, meeting room double-booked). If you are a higher-up, make it a point to show up early; some bosses are notorious for flouncing in late with their entourage, disrespecting their colleagues.

**Finish early, 10% to 20% early.** People in the audience will be thrilled, amazed, delighted. Word of what you did will spread like crazy throughout the building: 'They finished early, they finished early!' As people leave, they will say 'great meeting.' Others might ask "When's the next meeting?" No, they won't . . . in your dreams!

### CASE STUDY: HANDOUTS FOR THE JURY IN A COMPLEX CASE

In a comic opera spat between two hi-tech corporations over alleged trade secrets, Federal District Judge William Alsup, experienced in trials involving the angry rich, sought to speed up the case by providing the trial jury with paper handouts for reference, similar to handouts for opera audiences:

"Given the complexity of the case, Judge Alsup wanted jurors to have a few handouts to keep physically in-hand during the trial. 'One of the things that I think they ought to have is a handy-dandy list, a list of alleged trade secrets,' he said. The judge also urged the two sides to submit a glossary of the top dozen people so that jurors could have a clear notion of who is who."

## SPATIAL ADJACENCY VS. TEMPORAL STACKING:

### WHY DOCUMENTS AND THE WEB ARE BETTER THAN DECKS

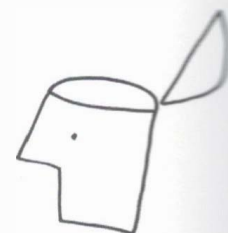
Documents and the web show information *adjacent in space* on high-resolution paper or on scrolling display screens, all within the viewer's common eyespan. Spatial adjacency activates the highest human skills: scanning over spatially distributed information and drilling down to find diamonds in micro spaces. Every viewer looks at documents and the web at their own pace and their own sense of what is relevant and important.

Display resolution governs the trade-off between spatial adjacency and temporal stacking. Higher resolution allows more *spatial* adjacency of data. Lesser resolution leads to more *temporal* stacking, as in phone answering services, which reach their dreary asymptote of binary, take-it-or-leave-choices stacked in time – “choose 1 to leave a message, 2 for appointments . . .” Slightly higher resolution would show all choices adjacent in space on one surface, so callers choose one by seeing all at once. In the last 25 years, display screen resolution increased from 5% of the resolution of paper to greater than 80%, making our displays finally worthy of the human eye-brain system. Improvements in display hardware made possible huge information throughputs adjacent in space, within the viewer's eyespan. Viewers control and interact with what they see.

Decks stacked in time, under the control of the presenter (an unreliable narrator), don't live beyond the moment – except when decks are redistributed to readers who get a big stack of paper with a 4 slides per sheet, or watching a video of someone reading aloud from a deck, or marching through one slide at time on a display screen. At least a screen is accompanied by delete and trash buttons. Decks also impose hierarchical models of information, a violation of the web principle that information displays should not impose restraints on the information. NASA and military contractors, however, make displays with 6 bullet levels of hierarchy. Two NASA post-accident Columbia investigation boards condemned engineering by PowerPoint (at my prompting). Military projects, such as the unsuccessful F35 fighter jet, were documented entirely in PPT. High-ranking military officers, generals and admirals, have roomfuls of 100s of soldiers/sailors working full-time making slide decks. Not good.

### THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF SPECTATORSHIP

When you attend a presentation, stay on the content. That's why you are there, that's why the presenter and the objects observed are there. See with an open mind but not an empty head. Be able to change your mind. Give your undivided attention as long as you can, loot the presentation for useful material, make the best of it. Don't let contrary elements in a presentation spoil your seeing and learning. If you require perfect agreement with presenters, stay home and stare at your immutable self in the damn mirror all day long. Just because someone disagrees with the third paragraph of your budget statement doesn't mean that they are Satanic. Their motives are no better or worse than your own. Listen, see, think, learn. Treat presenters as you would like to be treated.



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- TUFFE

AUSTIN KLEON