

“THE AUDIENCE-ORIENTED APPROACH” TO ENHANCING SCIENTIFIC PRESENTATIONS

by Jon Hooper, Ph.D.



THE PRIMARY PRINCIPLE OF PRESENTATIONS:

“Audiences respond to messages relevant to THEIR needs, not the needs of the speaker.”

The audience’s needs for information in a presentation are unlikely to mirror the speaker’s needs. As such, a speaker needs to analyze audience characteristics then base communication strategies on this analysis.

Hints for meeting the needs of a target audience are provided below.

PLANNING THE PRESENTATION

Identify then refine your topic.

First, determine the general topic or “subject” of your presentation (such as “Grizzly Bears”). Then, narrow your general topic down to a more specific one by thinking about the “story” you want to tell about your topic (such as “How to Survive Encounters with Grizzly Bears”).

Analyze your audience.

Gather information on key characteristics of your audience. You’ll need this information later to target your presentation to meet your audience’s needs.

Develop an audience-oriented behavioral objective(s) based on your audience analysis.

Creating a presentation without a clear overall behavioral objective (or objectives) is like shooting a bow and arrow without a target; there’s no way to know if you hit the bull’s-eye. A clear behavioral objective sets up such a target by identifying how audience members’ attitudes, knowledge, and/or behaviors should change by the end of your presentation.

Example: “After listening to my presentation, 75% of attendees will be able to list at least 3 of the 5 basic rules for grizzly bear encounters.”

When developing your behavioral objective(s), aim for moderate change, not “massive metamorphosis.” Don’t expect your audience to go too far, too soon.

Create a motivational theme (main message) based on audience needs.

Whereas a “topic” is the subject you’re going to cover, a “theme” describes what message you want to convey about the main subject. A theme is written as a one-sentence summary of the key idea you’re going to cover in your presentation.

Example: “You are likely to survive a grizzly bear encounter if you follow five basic rules.”

Don’t presume your audience is innately interested in your topic; you must provide motivators (i.e., reasons for audience members to listen). And, a communication strategy should usually have multiple motivators because different people are motivated by different factors. Audiences are rarely homogeneous.

Identify each slide’s intended impact (i.e., its purpose).

Each slide in your show needs to serve a specific purpose. By clearly identifying this purpose, you can then decide the minimum information needed in the slide for comprehension. Answer the following question for each slide: “What should members of my audience be able to remember once the slide is off the screen?”

Revisit your communication strategy several times.

Inspiration rarely comes under stress or in one “sitting.” Start working on your communication strategy way in advance of the date of your presentation and fine tune your communication strategy over time. A communication strategy is like a fine wine; it needs to age a bit before it is ready for consumption.

PREPARING THE PRESENTATION

Use graphics and photos, not text dumps, to depict key ideas.

People tend to comprehend and remember images better than words.

Include only the “bare essentials” in graphics to avoid “data dumps.”

A “graphic” is a visual representation of information that combines (1) type (letters, numbers, or symbols), (2) color, and (3) pictorial images (illustrations, diagrams, or photographs).

Presentation graphics require less detail than printed graphics because the speaker is present to explain them (i.e., the graphics are visual aids for the speaker, not stand alone objects). Presentation graphics that include only the minimum information needed for comprehension are the ones most likely to have an impact. As the saying goes, “Don’t teach the way you were taught” because most of your past teachers probably tended to overwhelm you with too much detailed information in their graphics.

Predict potential audience questions in advance and practice answering them.

Don’t take the “I hope they don’t ask me about...” approach.

Rehearse in front of people who resemble your audience.

Someone who has characteristics similar to your eventual audience members will be in a better position to spot problems with your show's organization, terminology, etc. than one of your colleagues.

Have a back-up plan (in case of equipment failure).

The show must go on. Your audience will expect a presentation even if your computer dies. At minimum, format your notes so you can refer to them to deliver the key components of your message.

PRESENTING THE INFORMATION

Start with the audience on your side (i.e., establish rapport).

Incorporate audience motivators in your introduction. Let your audience know why they should care about your topic (i.e., what they have to gain from your presentation) and why they should want to listen to you (i.e., why you are qualified to speak on the topic, what you have in common, etc.). Members of an audience are more likely to accept a message if they feel it relates to their needs and they approve of the source.

“Signpost” by describing your show's organization.

People enjoy the trip more if they know where they are heading and the stops along the way.

Tell a story (to glue “pieces of your puzzle” together).

Weave your message's “tidbits” into a story.

“Reveal” graphic components bit by bit (not all at once).

Remember that audience members have never seen your graphics before. As such, they cannot draw a conclusion about what a bar graph, for example, is showing until they understand what the X and Y axes represent and what each bar represents.

Define or explain all potentially-unfamiliar terms and concepts.

When an audience member doesn't know the meaning of a term you've used, the person will initially try to figure it out in their head. During this time, the person is probably missing other things you are saying.

Restate your theme (main message) several times in your presentation.

Repetition can bolster key points.

Involve your audience in the presentation at various spots to hold attention.

One of the biggest trends in presentations is “more audience involvement.” Involvement can vary from simply asking people to raise their hands in response to a question to asking them to verbally answer a question.

Provide several “means of action” in your explicitly-stated conclusion.

Psyched-up audience members who are motivated by your presentation to take action but who are not provided with specific ways to take action may “flip” and decide the issue isn’t really important after all. Several “means of action” may need to be suggested because different people are motivated into action by different factors. Also, state conclusions explicitly because audience members may draw the wrong conclusion if you don’t restate your main point(s) explicitly.

Provoke, don’t saturate.

Leave members of your audience wanting to learn more information about your topic on their own after your presentation, rather than feeling overwhelmed. Don’t try to teach them everything you know about a topic.

Let your host facilitate the question-and-answer period.

Your host can control your audience using techniques that might backfire if you were to try them. For example, your host can take questions from various parts of the room to make sure one person doesn’t dominate the question-and-answer period. However, if you tried to stop a dominant person from asking too many questions, it may look like you are afraid of the person’s questions (rather than looking like you are trying to be fair to everyone).

EVALUATING THE PRESENTATION

Don’t wait to evaluate!

Sometimes, you can incorporate questions of your audience into your conclusion that test whether or not your audience “got the message” about the key concepts in your presentation. If this isn’t possible, conduct a self evaluation of your presentation as soon as your audience leaves. Don’t wait until you get back to your office or home because you’ll forget many things that occurred in the presentation. Write down what went well (and why), then what could be improved (and how it could be improved).

CONCLUSION

Please do give scientific presentations! If you don’t, someone else will who may be less informed!