

Designing and delivering good presentations

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My presentations are far from perfect, but here are two exceptional books that transformed the way I think about presentations:

1. Presentation Zen, Garr Reynolds
2. Presentation Zen Design, Garr Reynolds

A bad presentation wastes everyone's time. You only live once. Why not use the moments when others honor you with their attention to make a real difference—to you, to your audience, to the world.

According to the books listed above, there are six principles for good presentations:

1. Design – Simplicity and restraint are key. The human brain does not multi-task very well. Don't make your audience try to read slides, squint, or think very hard if they are also expected to listen to you. The slides should aid your in-person presentation, not replace it (don't make "sliduments"). Otherwise, why are you there at all? Just send them your slides. Instead, make slides that make one point very clearly, with large images, simple diagrams or graphs, and minimal, high-contrast, large, easy to read text (1-2 words on a slide are often enough to aid your efforts to highlight the key points the graphics are meant to express).
2. Story – Tell a true story with your presentation. The human mind keys in on stories. If you want to wow them, this is where to do it... by telling an interesting story with a complication or a twist or a hook (but each slide is simple and easy). Explain a problem that the audience may not have considered. Discuss the possibilities. Then, explain how you struggled to solve this problem. Do not tell the audience the answer up front. Our brains will key in on the mystery, the conflict, and the struggle. In addition to the books above, see: <http://lifehacker.com/5965703/the-science-of-storytelling-why-telling-a-story-is-the-most-powerful-way-to-activate-our-brains?tag=communication>
3. Symphony – A symphony connects many musical performances together to form beautiful music. In the same way, your talk should make connections that may surprise and educate the audience.
4. Empathy – It is really important to know your audience. Yes, find out who they will be beforehand, to better craft your talk. But also pay attention to the audience while you present, interacting with them to keep their attention or restating a complicated thought to aid understanding.
5. Play – Don't be afraid to use humor. This does not mean jokes that may be offensive. But a well-placed funny image or telling an amusing story can really engage an audience. Don't be afraid to make your talk fun and interactive. Just make your humor appropriate for your audience.

6. Meaning – Your talk provides you with a limited opportunity to make a difference—for your life, for the lives of others, and for the world. Embrace it. Step up to the challenge. Take risks. Be engaged. Failure is ok, mediocrity is not. Do something extraordinary with your time.

There are finer points beyond each of these major principles. Here are a few of my favorites:

1. Ignore rules about the number of slides per minute. Make slides that tell your story. Practice giving your presentation. Add or trim as necessary. Don't be afraid to be under the time limit. Since when was anyone upset about seeing a short, really great, informative talk?
2. Step through necessary, complicated graphs/diagrams piece by piece so that your audience can follow the progression. I often start with just the axes.
3. Use grids and "powerpoints" (the intersections of lines of a tic-tac-toe board dividing your slide) to "balance" your layout. It is easier to compare items when they are the same size and grouped together. Alternatively, in a picture, it is often best to have the item of interest centered on one of the powerpoints rather than centered in the middle (makes the image more visually interesting). Images with a good amount of "blank" space are best for reducing complexity and providing an appealing location for 1-2 words.
4. Surprising content is often the most memorable. Save a "plot twist" or surprising, engaging image for part way through, or the end of your presentation.
5. Avoid bulleted lists. If they are necessary, have very little text per bullet, step through each point one at a time (explain each one verbally), and do not have more than one list slide in a row. Going through multiple long lists is one of the quickest ways to lose your audience. Another is to have multiple complicated slides in a row.
6. How you present yourself, body language, and the spoken word are also very important. Practice, practice, practice to reduce the "um" and other verbal ticks. If you feel yourself nervous and/or going too quickly, take a pause, a deep breath (or a drink), and move to a different location to continue your presentation. If possible, physically go up to your slides and point to components rather than using a laser pointer. Every so often, change your position in the room (but don't pace back and forth). Undulate your voice and be more animated, using your hands and changing your location or posture in order to draw the attention of the audience. Provide the audience with a moment to think (or even have them discuss) when you ask a thought-provoking question or give a profound quote or after a very important central message of the talk. The pause will provide an emphasis to your previous point. Might even say it again and give another pause to further emphasize. This change will also break up an otherwise continuous stream of speech from a single individual, bringing back the attention of the audience.
7. Finally, don't take yourself too seriously. Roll with the punches. Self-deprecation can be useful. Acknowledge the points made by your audience... "That's a really good point, but I think..." or "That is really interesting, let's talk more about it afterwards."

The books highlighted above are full of useful content and this handout is but a very brief overview. I highly encourage you to check them out and then work with 1-3 others on improving your presentations.