



Back to the Basics for an Effective Presentation

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We've all heard the proposition that the three R's (reading, writing and arithmetic) form the basis for a solid education. Proponents of this approach argue school curriculums have become cluttered with extraneous courses and activities at the expense of the fundamentals. The result they say, is that we graduate students without even minimal levels of competency. We'd benefit from looking at the basis for a solid presentation as well. Today's presentation technology that includes whiz bang special effects, the ability to incorporate multimedia elements into electronic slide shows and a plethora of font types, sizes and colors is producing more and more presentations that neglect the fundamentals by focusing too much on the superfluous.

In the schools of rhetoric in ancient Greece, aspiring speakers learned the three fundamentals of producing effective presentations: Invention, Arrangement and Style.

Invention centers on laying out a clear proposition and then supporting it. In the initial phases of my work with clients, I consistently find many unable to answer the question "What do you want to accomplish by the end of the presentation?" This inability to articulate the goal of the presentation arises because too many speakers focus on what they want to say, instead of the results they want to achieve. They're more concerned with constructing bullet points than making logical points. Thoughtful decisions about what types of evidence and proof points will strengthen the presentation require a clear statement of purpose. It's impossible to get where you're going with no destination in mind.

Arrangement refers to the organization of the material in a logical progression. At the broadest level, good organization means a clear introduction, body and conclusion. Each part must fulfill specific functions to create an overall effect. For example, an effective introduction will overcome preoccupation by getting attention, overcome indifference by showing the audience benefits and overcome uncertainty by previewing the key messages. Instead, I witness introduction after introduction that accomplishes none of these essentials and instead spends the first ten minutes reviewing where their firm has offices, how many years of experience they have and how many associates have some type of professional designation. Within the body, key messages should be structured around a logical thought pattern such as problem-solution or sequential. Moving from one key message to another requires thoughtful and apparent transitions. The conclusion has three functions as well. The first is to provide intellectual reinforcement of the key messages. The second is to provide psychological closure. The third is to provide a call to action. The conclusion shouldn't be used as an "overflow" bin to fit in information left out of the body because of time constraints or changing circumstances.

Style means the skillful use of persuasive language. It's concerned with both selecting individual words to establish the appropriate frame (rescue vs. bailout, or approval vs. signature) as well as combining words to create rhetorical effect through figures and tropes. Examples include metaphors and the use of *anaphora*, repeating the same words at the beginning of successive sentences ("We have to solve this problem before it gets any bigger. We have to solve this problem before it creates a domino effect. We have to solve this problem before we do anything else."). Recognize that style involves much more than just grammatical correctness. It also involves finding your own voice and communicating in such a way so as to build trust.

I don't mean to suggest that you abandon electronic slide shows entirely. They've become so entrenched in most business and professional presentations you probably couldn't eliminate them even if you wanted to. But be mindful of the role they play; they are support for a thoughtful presentation, not a substitute. Don't let a PowerPoint template determine how you create and communicate your value proposition to clients. Expecting an impressive deck of PowerPoint slides to help you create a powerful presentation is like expecting a word processing program to help you write a great novel. Great literature existed long before word processing and great speeches existed long before PowerPoint. Get back to the basics. You'll change audience expectations and add influence to your expertise.



Joe Sommerville shows professional services firms how to increase visibility, enhance credibility and close more business. Download the first chapter of RainMaking Presentations: How to Grow Your Business by Leveraging Your Expertise at www.RainMakingPresentations.com.