

How to Make Complex Ideas Easily Understood

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There's no reason presentations, even highly technical presentations, have to put audiences to sleep or leave them utterly confused. Strategically placing examples throughout your presentation both reinforces your key messages and adds life to the material. Statistics and technical data are often the first choice for supporting materials, but their use in presentations is like adding spice to food. Some adds flavor, but too much is overwhelming. You don't want your presentation to become a mere "infodump." The next time you're designing a presentation, consider using one of these five "proof points" that add a human touch and help complex ideas be more easily understood.

- **I. Factual example or narrative.** You might think of this proof point as a "mini case study." It could come from a newspaper or magazine article, something that's been in the news or even personal experience. Its purpose is to illustrate the truth of what you're saying by pointing to a similar factual case. An insurance agent might relate the story of how one of his clients was saved from financial disaster by wisely purchasing health or disability insurance. An attorney might refer to previous cases, or a real estate agent might point to successful transactions she's brokered in particular geographic areas.
- 2. Historical example. This proof point relies on an historical fact or anecdote. You'll create a great connection if you can link the date of your presentation to some event of historical significance. Research this by searching Google™ for "on this day in history." You'll find several Websites where you can enter a specific date and discover what happened on that day historically. You can also use historical analogies or lessons learned from historical events. In a presentation warning of the dangers of an avian flu outbreak, the speaker referred to the great influenza pandemic of 1918 to illustrate the widespread health and public safety effects such an outbreak could have in modern times.
- **3. Hypothetical example.** This proof makes the theoretical practical. It's useful for financial planners to illustrate the differences among various retirement plans, to explain differences in contracts or for a CPA to show the implications of tax code changes. To be most effective, a hypothetical example should resemble the audience's characteristics and experiences as closely as possible. That means researching your audience's

knowledge, belief, attitudes and values before the presentation and adapting your hypothetical example to align with their frame of reference.

- **4. Humorous example.** Humorous proof points can increase audience retention of the key messages and lighten the mood. It's important to note that humor has two parts; writing and delivery. Unless you're good at both, you probably shouldn't attempt it. Self-deprecating humor usually works best in a presentation. Like factual examples, the best humor will come from your own personal experience. Be cautious about using any humor that could appear to insult or belittle anyone or that audiences could judge to be in bad taste. Finally, remember that humor doesn't necessarily mean telling a joke. Jokes are only one type of humor, and one of the most difficult forms to pull off well.
- **5. Instantiation.** This proof point takes a hard-to-understand figure and uses an analogy to make it clear. Astronomers working with the Search For Extraterrestrial Intelligence (S.E.T.I.) Project once described their efforts as the same as looking for an inch long fish in all the world's oceans by straining one quart of water at a time. It's useful for making sense of very large numbers, as well as the unfamiliar. For example, a Web page at Berkeley University explains that a gigabyte of information is equal to a pickup truck full of paper.

Examples help your presentation because they create a connection with the audience. They help explain the abstract, obscure and theoretical through language and experiences the audience understands and can relate to. When you use concrete examples and specific instances to buttress your key messages, you'll be that much closer to achieving the goal of your presentation.



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