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The Truth Is, You Gave a Lousy Talk

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FIRST PERSON

Academics share their personal experiences

Of course I couldn't possibly be talking about *you*. After all, your friends and colleagues always congratulate you on your presentations. Even your competitors, when they approach you after your talks at national meetings, open their comments with, "Great talk!"

But seriously, don't you routinely commend people whose conference talks were marginal? How many of your colleagues actually give a great talk? Yet you willingly pat them on the back and walk away smiling, even if the seminar put you to sleep or left you questionless because of its inaccessibility.

I know. You were just being polite. So what does it mean when they offer you the same empty praise?

Maybe it's time to think about your presentation more objectively. To that end, I offer the following handy rubric. It doesn't focus on the things everyone already knows about public speaking (talk clearly, make eye contact). It focuses on the visual aids common to many a conference talk that are, nonetheless, often used badly. Use the rubric to grade your last seminar, awarding yourself between one and five points in each of the four categories. Be honest.

Communication. Academics often resort to slides to communicate information to listeners. That's fine, but the slides should enhance rather than detract from your presentation. They detract when their content is confusing.

Take, for example, those presenters who are so familiar with their own field that they use acronyms, abbreviations, and other jargon to speed communication among their close colleagues and co-workers. The problem comes when presenters fail to realize that their jargon is specific to their field, or worse, to their private circle.

Many presenters justify the use of jargon by defining it during the talk. But remember, the audience cannot flip back four slides to review the meaning.

Scoring: If you absolutely avoid the use of slang, acronyms, and field-specific references in your presentations, you get five points. Give yourself four if you only use terms that are universally accepted by your entire field, and three if you define jargon on your slides and then repeat it throughout your presentation. But you get only two points if you fail to define your jargon, and one if the undefined terms are central to the topic of your talk.

Clarity. Having a substantive message is important. Delivering it clearly is, too. The clarity of a talk relates directly to the effort that a presenter is willing to invest in the presentation, and that effort is a measure of the presenter's respect for the audience.

For example, let's assume that the presenter is reviewing work that has already been published, and includes important data in a table. The presenter might scan the table into a slide directly from the published text. But no one beyond the second row of the audience will be able to read the scanned reproduction of the 12-point Times Roman font. If the presenter respects the audience, he or she will make the effort to reformat the table in a larger type size (18 to 24 points) with a clearer font (Arial or Helvetica).

Other principles of clarity also revolve around the idea of the speaker viewing the presentation from the perspective of the audience. Small type and fancy fonts look great on your monitor, but are difficult to read when they are projected on a wall.

Slides should have a title. If an audience member's attention wanders for a moment, the title helps focus the viewer on the main point of the slide. And you do want to help the audience focus on your main points.

Colors are important. While you can see red type on a blue background on your monitor, the lack of contrast is hard to read on a slide and aggravating to the viewer. Yellow symbols on a white background might as well be written in invisible ink.

Scoring: If you always ask yourself how the audience will view your presentation and you make an effort to make each slide as clear as possible, you get five points. If you adopt a laissez-faire attitude (for example, you are willing to accept the default colors and fonts that Excel chooses for your graph), you get three points. If you purposely ignore the issue of clarity because your audience should be clamoring for front-row seats to grasp at your pearls of wisdom, you get one point.

Focus. Technology is a good thing, right? The more, the better? Wrong.

My cell phone can store more than 200 phone numbers. Yours can probably store 10 times more. Does that mean I should find 200 phone numbers to put into my cell? No. If I had that many stored in my cell phone, it would take me longer to find the 20 I use regularly. Likewise, if PowerPoint offers 200 special effects, should I use them all in one presentation?

What is the goal of your talk? To deliver a message about content, right? At the end of your presentation, would you rather the audience ask questions about your subject area or about which pull-down menu in PowerPoint allows you to create that spinning checkerboard fade-in?

Please don't show an empty slide to whet my appetite for theatrical entrances. If you feel the urge to tease the audience with a bit of text here, an arrow there, a picture that zooms into place, resist it. Just show me the whole concept and then use your words to guide my understanding of your slide.

Similarly, you should resist the temptation to personalize the background of your slides with artistic, esoteric watermarks. Your customized background only makes it more difficult to see the foreground and competes with your content for the attention of the audience.

You don't have to insert that rainbow sunburst comet to draw attention to the title of your slide. I know where to find the title of a slide -- it's at the top. Also, a frame around your slide is redundant; the projection screen provides a frame.

I'm not saying that technology is bad. If you incorporate multimedia because it is important to the content of your presentation, that's a plus. But please don't get too clever or cute. It only distracts me, and I have a short enough attention span as it is.

Scoring: Start by giving yourself five points. Now go through your talk and subtract half a point every time you find an example of unnecessary or distracting graphics or animation. Note: It is possible to achieve a negative score in this category.

Presentation. Even with compelling topics and outstanding visual aids, some speakers still find ways to undermine their own talks, and their primary means of torpedoing themselves lies in their presentation style. Remember, the audience is listening to your words and looking at your slides. You are performing.

Presentation Folly No. 1: If you don't believe in your work, neither will the audience. Some presenters reflexively apologize for their presentations. That lack of confidence sends a message to the audience to stop listening. The speaker might say, "The experiment didn't work, but here are the results" or "While it's not the most exciting idea out there, here is my opinion."

If you don't like your work, why waste my time by presenting it? There is a difference between humility and self-doubt. Humility is greeted with respect. Self-doubt spawns a lack of interest.

Likewise, if you feel the need to apologize for your slides, then change your slides. We've all heard a presenter say, "This is a busy slide, but I'll walk you through it." No. Don't walk me through it. Make a better slide. If that slide is the best way to present your idea, then don't apologize for it.

Presentation Folly No. 2: If you take the time to show something during your presentation, have the decency to explain it. Folly No. 2 is a corollary to Folly No. 1.

"Here is a busy slide," you might say, "but just focus on this part of the slide." Why distract me with 30 pieces of information so that you can make one point? Again, make a slide that illustrates that point.

Don't settle for a slide that was designed for another talk or another audience. After all, if you have time to animate the entrance of each of your bullet points, then you certainly have time to make a new slide.

Presentation Folly No. 3: Don't disagree with your slides. Believe it or not, there are several ways to disagree with your slides, and they are all bad.

You can casually disagree with your slides by showing one set of information and saying something mildly different. That error is often made by people who are trying to avoid reading their slides. They are afraid to look dumb by speaking the words that they so carefully chose to type into their presentation.

Don't be afraid to read the slide -- at least in small chunks. The audience is listening, but it is also reading your slides. When you purposely use different words, the audience then has to choose which version of the presentation takes precedence.

Worse yet, some speakers have a passive-aggressive relationship with their slides. I never understand how a speaker can put up a slide and then announce that the slide is showing the opposite of what is obviously displayed. But it happens regularly.

If you use the words, "This slide clearly shows," then the slide had better clearly show your point.

Worst of all, some speakers actually argue with their slides. "Ignore this statement. It's wrong." "This slide shows an example, but it is not representative of the group." With those presenters, it is almost as if someone else made the slides, and they are criticizing the presentation.

Own the presentation, don't fight it.

Scoring: Award yourself five points. Keep all five if none of those follies apply to you, and subtract a point for each one you are guilty of. Give back all five points if you've committed all three.

OK, it's time to tally your points. If you scored 18 to 20 points, you deserve every post-talk accolade you receive; 14 to 17 means you could stand to improve; 10 to 14, your presentations are not helping your career; fewer than 10, your presentations are probably hurting your career.

You might disagree with my recommendations and decide not to take any of my advice. Rest assured, if I see your next presentation, I'll say "Great talk!" anyway.

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