

## Tales of woe from a scientific presentation coach

*The worst presentation techniques can be instructive!*

As a presentation coach, I have published several articles with [recommendations](#) for increasing the effectiveness of scientific presentations. However such recommendations may ring empty without an understanding of the context motivating them. The following are brief vignettes that led to some of the recommendations.

*The King and I (Apologies to Rodgers and Hammerstein)*

While I was working at a cancer research center, the acting director decided that a few key researchers should deliver 10 minute presentations to the incoming permanent director. One presenter was an accomplished scientist who had dubbed himself the “Powerpoint King;” proud of his incomprehensibly detailed presentations that typically included 100 or more complex slides.

I was given the assignment of wedging the “King” into the 10 minute format; a Herculean task given his highness’ determination to resist every edit. My pride in accomplishing this was short lived. The “King” reinserted most of his original slides for the final presentation. The acting director cut him short; and the incoming director-in what could only have been an act of politeness-thanked him for an outstanding presentation. The “King” left with his crown was secure.

Lessons:

1. Many scientists have an irresistible urge to include too much detail; failing to recognize that slide presentations are a poor format for conveying comprehensive information. Presentations can create interest, provoke discussion, and stimulate collaborations; but papers or journal articles are a better format for detailed data.
2. Many listeners want to be polite. The comment “good presentation” should be accepted skeptically. Always dry run your presentation with an unapologetically honest colleague.

*No Time to Die (Apologies to James Bond)*

At the 45-minute mark of a one-hour presentation the speaker announced, “I’m going to have to speed up to get through all my material.” The talk became a stupefying blur that still finished five minutes late. Killing the presentation earlier would have increased audience comprehension and allowed for discussion and questions.

Lessons:

1. Speaking faster and rapid slide flipping is not an acceptable approach to time management and you often have less time than planned (the projector breaks, the talk starts late, etc.). Figure out what you might be willing to cut or summarize prior to your talk. Constructing a written narrative that identifies the key points, prior to making slides, can help.
2. A good discussion is more important than getting through every slide. 24 hours after a talk the audience will remember few specific slides, but they might recall thematic ideas and stimulating discussion.

*I Me Mine (Apologies to the Beatles)*

I was asked to critique a dry run by the director of large scientific center. I commented that at several points the director’s spoken words had no connection to the slides. I said the audience wouldn’t know

whether to listen to the speaker or read the slide and suggested not using slides at those points. The director rejected my comment saying, "I'm uncomfortable talking without a visual."

Lessons:

1. Presenters frequently do things that please themselves at the expense of audience comprehension. They may show unnecessary visuals, include favorite results of minor importance, try to demonstrate how hard they worked, etc.
2. One frequent example is lifting graphics from journal articles, without taking the time to make them "presentation-friendly." The fonts are too small; a portion of the graphic is irrelevant; the legend is difficult to read; etc. One presenter saves time, multiple audience members waste it.

### *The Children's Hour (Apologies to Lillian Hellman)*

This vignette occurred during one of my own presentations when I was a very young researcher. I presented an all-text slide and started to read it. A crusty senior researcher piped up, "Stop, I know how to read." So the next time an all-text slide appeared, I asked the audience to read it. The same researcher piped up, "I came to hear a talk, not receive a reading assignment."

I was confused. Do I read the slide or let the audience read it?

Lessons

1. Neither. Summarize and amplify, don't read. An effective presentation is a synergy between voice and visual; more powerful than either alone. Not every detail or word need be on the slide. Keep graphics simple and add detail with voice. If it's a text slide, write only enough words to provide visual cues for your spoken words.
2. Realize slides don't stand on their own (if they did, why are you talking?). Focus your oral presentation on explaining the slide's content. Don't create separate audio and visual stories. Use the pointer to visually connect spoken words to the part of the slide you are amplifying.

You are likely to see many incomprehensible presentations in your career. Don't despair, they will contain lessons about how to improve your own presentations.

David Rubenson  
nobadslides.com  
[nobadslides@gmail.com](mailto:nobadslides@gmail.com)  
310-739-2809