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# GIVING A BETTER PRESENTATION

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# Introduction

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Hello! I'm Ian. Over the past five years, I've accidentally become a professional public speaker! I've keynoted state conferences, run full day workshops, and worked with parents and kids. Public speaking is really hard. I never get it quite right. But I've learned a ton and hopefully this document will help you improve as a presenter.

Feel free to contact me for any reason at [ian@byrdseed.com](mailto:ian@byrdseed.com).

Enjoy!

## The Big Idea

If you don't have time to read the whole document right now, here are my three main ideas:

1. Plan on paper long before Powerpoint.
2. Your presentation should be a story, not a list of ideas.
3. You must practice out-loud.

# The Planning

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Want to jump straight to Powerpoint and start building slides? That's like filming a movie without a script. You've got to go through the process before publishing. Plan before Powerpoint!

## Think

First, I just think.

I think a *lot* before planning a presentation. I think laying in bed, I think in the shower, I think while I'm jogging. As I think, I dump my thoughts onto a yellow legal pad (I like to stay away from technology at this point).

I jot down any idea for the presentation: opening jokes, fun metaphors, ideas for images, anecdotes, or questions to ask the audience. I sketch potential slides. I write out specific sentences I want to say. There's no pressure to be organized. There's no need for these ideas to be good. It's a brain dump.

Give yourself a few days for this.

## Find The Story

Then, as I look at my ideas, I try to find "the story" of the presentation. What's the real problem I'm addressing? How will it be solved? The story helps an audience build meaning. Without a story, you just have a list of ideas.

## From Ideas To Story

I was planning a presentation called "Small Ways To Improve Student Writing." I had lots of ideas, but lacked *the story*. How would I frame these ideas into a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end?

I realized that, as a teacher, I could help my most struggling writers (since they made obvious mistakes). But I had no idea how to make on-level writers advanced. Advanced writers just seemed born that way.

This became the story: "*How can we take decent writers and make them excellent?*"

## What's Your Story?

What's your presentation's story? What's the problem you're helping your audience solve? You should be able to sum this up in a question:

- How do we make spelling lists interesting?
- How do we develop math projects that connect to social studies?
- How can we empower students to take social risks?

I'm already on the edge of my seat to see where these stories go!

# The Organizing

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Now, armed with lots of ideas plus a clear story, I start organizing into an outline (still just using my yellow pad of paper). The goal: find three main points. This breaks time down into manageable chunks, and helps the audience follow the story.

Much like a movie, we'll structure the talk in a predictable way with an introduction, three acts, and a closing scene.

For an hour talk, I'd plan my time like this:

1. Take 10 minutes to set up the story.
2. Give at least 5 minutes at the end for a closing (plus it's good to end a bit early).
3. That leaves 45 minutes, or 15 minutes per point.

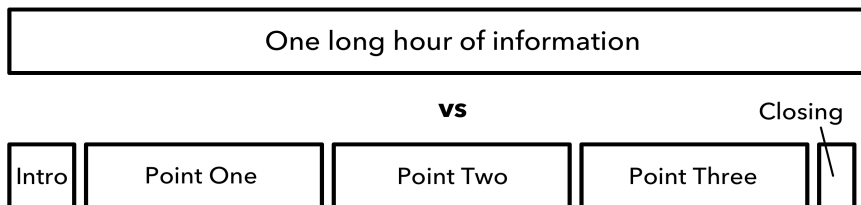
Suddenly the hour is not so intimidating. It's really a bunch of short talks connected by an overarching story.

# The Intro

If your talk is a story, the intro is where you get buy-in from your audience. Think about the opening scene of a James Bond, Indiana Jones, or Pixar film. You're hooked in the first five minutes.

In the intro:

- Introduce yourself! Be a person, not just another presenter. Toss a some funny personal fact. This makes people relate to and remember you.
- Present your problem: "I don't know about you, but in 20 years of teaching, I've never seen students who can..." This problem should make your audience smirk and nod. They're hooked!
- Build on the problem: why is this *really* a problem? Use an analogy. Share real examples. Show a video clip. Take some time to make the problem, and its effects, clear to the audience.
- Finally, introduce your three points: "Today, we're going to tackle this problem by..."



## The Points

Now you're into the meat of the talk. The audience should be primed and receptive. Keep these points aligned with the problem you introduced in the intro.

### Bold Beginnings and Endings

Begin each section by stating the point clearly. Then, end by restating the point. Be sure to explicitly connect it back to the problem.

**Beginning Point One:** First, we're going to look at how students can add variety to their writing by changing the beginning of their sentences. This will help on-level writers become more advanced.

**Ending Point One:** Okay, so that was how students' writing will improve just by changing the beginnings of sentences. That will help our on-level writers get better. [Now begin point two]

It may feel silly, but these statements guide your audience through the presentation. They provide structure and make your story easier to understand and remember.

Keep in mind: your audience is hearing all this for the first time and they need your help to process it all.

### Each Point Must Support The Story

Just like each scene in a movie moves the plot along, each point must serve the presentation's story. This means you must remove ideas that don't directly support your main point. Sometimes this means good ideas have to go.

Think about deleted scenes from movies. They're often great scenes, but were somehow *inessential*. The editor had to make room for the scenes that serve the whole story better.

As you plan your main points, be a ruthless editor. Remember: most talks have too much, not too little. Most presenters run out of *time*, not material.

### Build In Interactivity

As you end a point, it's the *perfect* chance to let your audience share ideas. We know participation is a key part of learning, but so many presentations leave this out (and no, asking "any questions?" at the end of the hour does not count as interactivity).

Your moments of interactivity don't need to be elaborate experiences, just chances for the audience to process your presentation. They can be as simple as saying, "I know we all have different needs, so let's think a moment about how you could you use this idea in *your* classrooms."

Plan in a few minutes for think time, pair sharing, and whole group discussion after each point.

## The Closing

Easily the most overlooked part of a talk, the closing is your chance to make a final impression. Are you calm and confident? Or are you frazzled and apologetic?

The closing *must* connect to the introduction. Show the same images, make the same analogy, and remind everyone how the three points solve the opening problem.

Think of *Finding Nemo*, *The Wizard of Oz*, or *Toy Story*: these movies all end *exactly* where they started. They physically and emotionally bring us back to the beginning to show us how far we've come.

A presentation should do the same.

# The Slides

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Now that your presentation is planned out, it's time to start the slides. And oh boy is there a lot to say about creating slides.

Above all, remember that *you* are the focus of your presentation, not the slides. They exist to support you. And they aren't even always necessary.

## Managing Attention

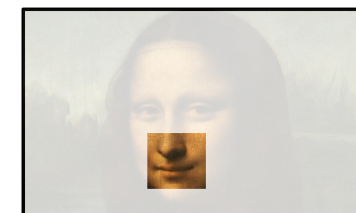
Designing slides is about managing audience attention. *A new slide will always draw attention away from you.* If there's a paragraph, a photo, and a table of numbers, the audience's attention will stay on the slide while your voice fades into the background. It's like turning the Super Bowl on while trying to have a serious conversation.

If you want the audience's attention on you, use simple slides. A title. One image. Something that reinforces your words. The audience will look at it, understand it, then look at you again. Heck, try out a pure black slide and watch every face turn right back at you.

But sometimes you *want* their attention on the slide. You may be showing a video, a chart, or a photo. In this case: *stop talking!* Let your audience process the slide. That silence is awkward for you, but they won't care. They're focused on understanding what you're showing them.

If you want the audience's attention on *only part* of an image, graph, or paragraph, then simply block the rest out. Reveal it later. You can move your audience's attention from place to place as necessary.

Here, I'm managing the audience's attention by only revealing parts of the *Mona Lisa* as necessary. In the first slide, I'd speak about her eyes. In the second, her mouth. I keep my audience right where I want them without the chance of looking ahead.



Here are my top five tips for making better slides:

### 1. Slides ≠ Notes

Like everyone, I once used my slides as notes to myself. Mostly because I was scared I'd forget what to say. But that's wrong. Slides are not for the presenter at all. They're for the audience.

Any time I'm fiddling with a slide, I must ask: am I doing this to help me because I'm scared? Or am I doing it to help my audience understand my message?

If you need notes, by all means use notecards or Powerpoint's presenter mode. But I bet you won't need notes at all, because you're going to practice.



## 2. No Templates

I *always* start with a blank slide - either plain black or white. Then I add only what that slide needs. Some slides need an image, some need a sentence, and some need a quote or a graph. But I *never* start with a template.

Just think: who made those templates? A programmer? A designer trying to make a “cool looking” background. A marketer, showing off their app’s features?

None of these people are giving a presentation! And they’re certainly not giving *your* presentation.

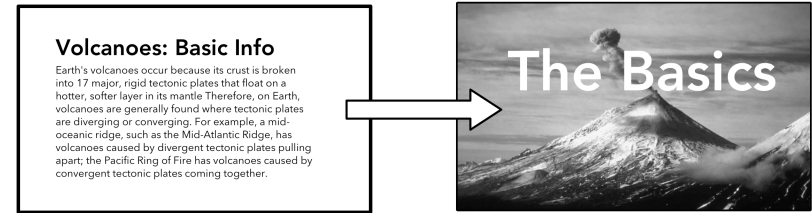
Each slide should meet that slide’s particular needs. The only way to do that is to start from scratch, and add only what is essential for that slide’s message.

Further, templates often add visual noise in an attempt to look fancy. They’re packed with gradients, shapes, and colors that don’t add information - just distraction. Go for simple, high contrast slides.

## 3. Fewer Than 5 Words

Words on slides should be titles, not paragraphs. The audience shouldn’t be reading, they should be listening to you! Unless you’re posting a quote, limit yourself to 5 words per slide.

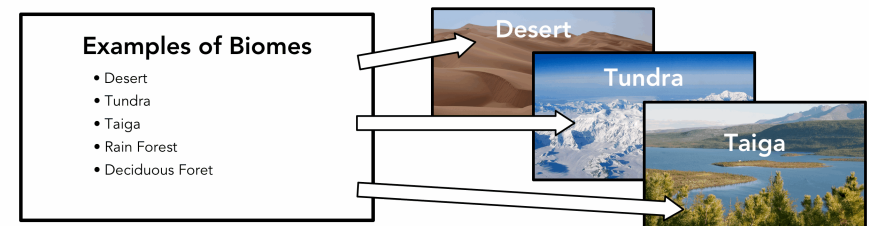
With only a few words on the screen, you can make your font size as big as possible. I’d say 60 points is the minimum, but I regularly use sizes above 200 points. Why not? Have you ever heard someone complain that the font is *too big* in a presentation?



And, when possible, use no words at all. Instead, pick an evocative, entertaining, emotional image that represents the topic. There are *tons* of resources for quality images online. There’s no excuse to use bland clip art. Don’t overdo it, but striking images can really bring a point home.

## 4. Break Out Bullet Points

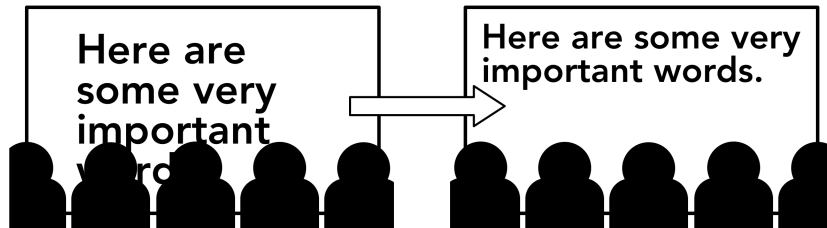
Most templates are based off of bullet points. Don’t use these. Make each bullet its own slide. Instead of five bullet points on one slide, make five separate slides. This helps people focus on the point you’re making, not a point you’ll be making later.



## 5. Top Two Thirds

Most projection screens are set up too low. This means that people in the front will block the bottom of the screen for those in the back. Then, people in the back have to stand up to see the bottom of slides.

Easy solution: don't use the bottom 20% of your slide or so. Never put words there. Never put essential imagery there. Consider it a no man's land.



## No Slide Handouts!

Finally, do not pass out copies of your slides to attendees.

This is like walking into *Psycho*, *The Sixth Sense*, or *The Empire Strikes Back* and being handed the script! It kills all the drama and suspense you're going to build. Everyone can just flip through the handouts. They can fast forward through your presentation *while you're giving it*.

Yes. People will moan about this. They're addicted to handouts. Stay strong. It's for their own good. Let them know that the slides will be available afterwards, and then post a PDF online.

# Preparation

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You must practice. And you must practice out-loud.

It's amazing how many presenters at conferences get up in front of an audience without ever (even once) practicing their presentation. You can tell because: their slides malfunction, their text has typos, they look to their slides to guide them, and they run out of time.

You *must* practice. And it *must* be out loud. At least one time.

Make your practice as much like the real presentation as possible. I hook my laptop up to a TV, stand up, use my remote, and present to my wife. It's incredible how much this helps. I am *ten times* more confident when I do the real thing.

It's so important, I'll write it again: you *must* practice your talk *out loud* at least once.

You will be so much more confident.

After you practice, you will want to make some changes to your presentation. I always do. I remove entire points, simplify slides, or rearrange ideas. This means you can't practice the night before at 1am!

## Watch Other Presenters

As you practice, seek out great speakers to study. Go outside education. It's not so much for their content, but for their *performance*. What do they do with their hands, face, body, voice, and technology? How do they connect emotionally with their audience?

Try watching and listening to speeches from a diverse group of people: everyone from Martin Luther King to Seth Godin to Oprah Winfrey. Their final goals may be different from yours, but there's something to learn from every quality speaker.

The author James Altucher offers my favorite public speaking advice: watch stand-up comedians. Great comedians deliver highly rehearsed material while making it feel off-the-cuff. They command attention with no slides. They use silence, body language, and their voice to captivate. Of course, this doesn't mean you must be funny on stage, just confident.

TED Talks often have great visuals and confident speakers. I don't think the style holds up for an hour, but, again, take what you can by studying the presenter and adjusting it to fit your own speaking situation.

# The Presentation

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Finally. The big day is here. You're nervous (but you're less nervous since you practiced). Here are some day-of tips from my own experience.

## Room Tips

You're in the room. You're plugged in. People are entering.

- Have water ready. This keeps your voice from sounding weird, but (more importantly) it gives you a reason to stop talking and take a breath.
- I also keep mints with me for right after the talk.
- This is *your room* now. Adjust everything to your liking: lights, tables, chairs, A/C, and so on. I've annoyed many hotel tech people by fiddling with the projector until I liked it. I want my room to be *just right*.
- Walk around the room and see what it looks like from the back, the middle, and the sides. This helps me understand what things look like to the audience. It's very different back there.
- Turn on some fun music. This'll warm up the environment and reduce awkwardness.
- Greet your audience. I stand right outside my door and say hi to people. Then I'm not nervously pacing around or fiddling with my slides. Plus, I get to quickly connect with everyone who comes in. (But make sure you know where the restroom is. This is by far the most common question I get!)

## Speaking Tips

When you are nervous, your body does weird things. You sweat, your mouth goes dry, you get tense, time seems to slow down. These are physical responses to danger. They're great for fleeing from a bear, but terrible for public speaking. In fact, you'll have to actively fight these physical responses.

- Slow down. Take deeper breaths. Allow silence.
- If you're sweaty (as I often am) hold a cold water bottle in your hands to lower your body temperature.
- Walk around while you speak. It'll loosen you up. It gets you closer to your audience. And, frankly, it makes you more fun to watch.
- Face forward and make eye contact. Avoid staring at your slides, as comforting as this may feel.
- Focus on a smiley audience member. Ignore people with bored-looking faces. They're not really bored, they're just listening.
- Don't apologize or downplay yourself. Don't make jokes about being unprepared or uncertain. Be confident!

## Interactivity Tips

When you ask for input from the audience, expect them to behave like a group of polite students. They'll listen quietly, but will be hesitant to share. Bring out the same techniques you'd use with students to encourage participation:

- Give purposeful think time. Silence is awkward for you, but your audience needs that silence to process.
- After thinking privately, let everybody chat with their neighbors.
- Only *then* should you ask the room to share out. You'll get way more ideas. *This works like magic!*

## Ending Early

If it's an hour session, I'll aim to start my conclusion at 50 minutes. This gives me breathing room in case we started late, sharing went long, or I went over on a point.

Plus, people love to go early. They can get to the next session, hang out and chat, grab coffee, or use the restroom.

As the last ten minutes approach, *do not* try to cram a final point in. Just let it go. It's far better to give two solid, well-paced ideas than to try to jam in a panicked third.

When you skip a point, be graceful. Don't furiously click through your slides. Calmly walk to your laptop, exit the presentation, find the next section, and restart there. Don't even mention what you're doing.

The audience's final memory of you is someone calmly restating the main points, thanking them for coming, and giving back some of their time.

Contrast that with someone chaotically blasting past slides, apologizing for going long, and stealing time from their guests.

You're going to do great.