Presentation
Techniques

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Second edition

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Preface

We both teach communication skills to university students and staff (Manon at the University of Amsterdam, and Bob at Delft University of Technology). Over the years, we have worked with a variety of teaching materials for presentation skills. The books we used were excellent, but most of them were not primarily geared to our target group, the academic world. So we decided to write our own book instead. We have tried to create a concise, easily accessible book that will be helpful to beginning and more experienced speakers in Academia, focussing our examples and tips and hints on a wide range of disciplines in the academic world, both in the humanities and in the sciences.

We wish to thank a number of people who were instrumental in the evolution of this book. First of all, our students, who have been a source of learning for us. And then, all the people who helped us develop as trainers of communication techniques: the Presenting with Impact group at McKinsey & Company (Andy Binns, Janice Burres, Jill Greatorex, Jerry Stauduhar, Deborah Thomas, and Teresa Woodland), and the Communication Skills group of the IT&C at Delft University of Technology (Wim Blokzijl, Corrie de Haan, Caroline Wehrmann, Pauline Post, Karen van Oijen, Roos Naeff, Angeniet Kam, and Nolanda Klunder).

We especially want to thank the colleagues who read earlier drafts of this book for their valuable comments: Bas Andeweg, Anne Bannink, Rien Elling, and Rose van der Zwaard. And lastly, thanks are due to our excellent editor, Clare McGregor, who helped us avoid many mistakes. Any remaining ones are, of course, our own.

Preface to the second edition

Although time has not stood still since we wrote the first edition of *Presentation Techniques* in 2007, of course the same basic principles still apply to the art of presenting. Presenters still need to answer questions like: who is in my audience, and what message do I want to put across? And although

technology has advanced rapidly, especially in the field of data sharing, there has been no technological revolution in presentation tools that has forced us to reconsider large parts of the book. Nevertheless, we felt the book needed an update. Some of the examples and illustrations we used in the first edition have dated. And yes, we decided that in a book on oral presentation that should take us to 2020, we should not include a large section on overhead projectors and 40 mm slides. So you have before you a brand new, up-to-date edition of *Presentation Techniques* which we hope will guide you through the process of preparing for a presentation, and help you present successfully, without too much stress.

Spring 2013,
Manon and Bob van der Laaken

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

What is a presentation? One of our colleagues once defined it as everything that comes between 'I want to say a few words' and 'Are there any questions?' There are obviously countless opportunities to speak in public. At weddings and funerals, political gatherings and union rallies, at Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park and on momentous ceremonial occasions, in management seminars and in stand-up comedy sessions: people have spoken to crowds to sway them, rally them, inform them, comfort them, warn them or amuse them for thousands of years. And thousands of books have been written to help them improve their speaking skills, from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to Chris Steward's *The Bluffer's Guide to Public Speaking*.

This book focuses on presentations given in 'Academia', the academic world. What then, is an 'academic' presentation? For the purposes of this book, it is a presentation given in an academic or educational context, whether this is a course lecture or seminar, a guest lecture, a conference, a workshop or a PhD ceremony. An academic presentation is given by a scientist, scholar or student to share his or her expertise or findings with an audience of peers, colleagues or superiors. Typically, these are presentations for insiders: people who share a lot of the same background and expertise, or who are being trained in the field.

The quintessential academic presentation is perhaps the presentation at a scientific conference. Such conferences often take up several days, during which a large number of scientists present their research papers. Usually, there are so many speakers that several presentations are held simultaneously during parallel 'sessions'. Presentations are usually short (15 to 20 minutes) and are followed by a 10-15 minute slot for discussion. There are also plenary sessions, usually one at the beginning and sometimes one or two more in the course of the conference. During these sessions, a keynote speaker, usually a respected senior scientist, will address the whole conference. Thousands of scientific conferences are held every year; hundreds of thousands of people attend them. The Institute of Electrical and Electron-

ics Engineers (IEEE), for instance, sponsors more than 1300 conferences around the world every year. For you as a presenter, this means that you had better be as effective, efficient and convincing as you can, to make your presentation stand out among all the others in the pressure cooker situation of such a conference.

Students give academic presentations too, and are often asked to show their teachers and their peers what they have learned, to share the outcome of a project, or to demonstrate and defend a design their group has made. Even if they are not presenting research papers – a group of first years might simply be presenting the results of a literature search – they are still dealing with complex scientific material that needs to be presented to the academic community. And of course, they have to learn how to do that.

This book aims to help members of academic communities to give better presentations. The absolute demand that findings be shared makes academic presentations slightly different from presentations in the 'real world', but of course, many of the problems are similar. Certain problems are common to all public speakers, and within Academia we have created a few of our own as well. In this book, we will help you deal both with the problems that every presenter has to deal with and with the 'special' problems that you will face when you give an academic presentation. We have taken examples from different academic disciplines, ranging from technology to art history and linguistics.

We have organised the book as follows. In Chapter 2 we describe a step-by-step approach to preparing your presentation. We then go into more detail in Chapter 3, which deals with the structure of your presentation. This includes: the introduction and its potential to make or break your presentation right at the start; the body of your presentation and the complex task of presenting all your data in a sensible order; the conclusion and the art of recapping your main points. Chapter 4 will help you decide what type of visuals to use during your presentation. Chapter 5 will deal with delivery, focussing on practical things to bear in mind while you are presenting. Finally, Chapter 6 will deal with the question and answer session: how do you prepare for it, and how do you handle various types of questions? Throughout, we have provided examples of idiomatic expressions to use in academic presentations, for example when moving on from one point to another, indicating significance or referring to other people's research.

Preparing your talk

What is the first thing you do when you start to prepare for a presentation? Many people will answer: 'Switch on the computer and create a slide show.' Usually, they spend the next half hour staring at an empty computer screen, wondering why they are not having any brilliant ideas. Others will start making endless bulleted lists, summarising the entire talk. Many speakers will start by complaining that there is no way they can squeeze three years of research into a fifteen-minute presentation. Unfortunately, few people will start by asking themselves useful questions like: 'Why am I giving this presentation?' and 'For whom?' Yet these are the questions that can help you most when preparing your talk. In this chapter, we will offer a six-step approach to preparation that has been used successfully by professional speakers in Academia, business and politics.

2.1 Step 1: Determine your purpose

'What is the purpose of my presentation?' This may seem a strange question at first. Nevertheless, it is an important one, since it determines the kind of information you are going to try to convey. Are you going to show your audience how something works? Are you going to explain why they should switch to a new system? Will you try to make them feel excited about your revolutionary new idea? Or are you just going to 'say a few words' about your project? (Please don't!) To determine what the purpose of your presentation is, simply ask yourself:

> After my presentation, what should my audience
> know
> think
> be able to do?

This question will help you select the relevant information to include if you are reporting on the progress of your research; it will help you leave out un-

necessary details if you are trying to persuade a selection committee to give you a research grant; and it will help you select relevant visuals if you are demonstrating your product or your new laboratory setup. In other words, determining your purpose will enable you to 'select out' much information that you do not need. And it will help you identify the key components of your presentation. In the following sections, we will briefly introduce three main purposes that your presentation might serve: to inform, to persuade and to instruct. These purposes will be further developed in Chapter 3.2, when we discuss how to organise the body of your presentation.

2.1.1 Informative presentations

What research has recently been done into the efficiency of internal combustion engines? What methods can be used to study the behaviour of people under stress? What causes contributed to the refusal of the French to support the European constitution? How did the pronunciation of English change around 1500? In informative presentations you present only the facts, often because your audience needs that information to make a decision or to form an opinion. For instance, in order to decide how to organise a new investigation into hooliganism, a speaker may have been asked to conduct a literature search into the methods that have so far been used to investigate aggression in football stadiums. In the medical world, radiologists are supposed to describe exactly what can be seen on an MRI-scan. This is their expertise. They are expected to comment on these data, saying whether or not they are normal. They are not, however, supposed to interpret the data to explain the complaints a patient might have. This is the work of the physician who ordered the scans, and who may have consulted not only the radiologist, but also several other experts in order to come to a diagnosis. Purely informative presentations therefore do not usually lead up to a conclusion in which the data are interpreted, because that is not their function. Instead, their 'conclusions' usually take the form of a summary.

There are a number of challenges posed by purely informative presentations. Firstly, you will have to be comprehensive yet succinct. This entails limiting yourself to a topic that is small enough to deal with in the time available. For instance, the internal combustion engine is the result of decades of research by thousands of researchers. It is unlikely that you will be able to describe its mechanics completely in fifteen minutes, so you will have to be selective. Be aware that when you start selecting data because

you cannot fit them all in your presentation, you are implicitly attaching more importance to some facts than to others. Your second challenge is that you will have to comment on the data without interpreting them. If some of the data are remarkable, or out of the ordinary, it is your job to point this out. No more, no less.

2.1.2 Persuasive presentations

What is the best internal combustion engine for our purpose? Which method of studying the behaviour of people under stress should we use? Why is the European constitution essential to the wellbeing of the French? Which theory best explains the changes in the pronunciation of English around 1500? In persuasive presentations we present evidence to underpin our own opinion. We do not need to offer all the available information on the topic, just the bits that are relevant to our argument.

It is important to realise whether the purpose of your presentation is purely informative or persuasive. Many students fail to see, for instance, that the informative presentation they have planned for their professors ('Today we will show you the results of our project') should really be an argumentative one ('Today we will tell you why the results of our project are so *significant*').

The challenges posed by persuasive presentations include those of establishing your authority (why would anyone believe you when you say that nuclear power is safe?), deciding how to organise your information for maximum persuasive effect, and conveying your enthusiasm. For more help with these points, see Chapter 3.

2.1.3 Instructive presentations

What steps should be taken to build the internal combustion engine into our design? How should data on people under stress be collected? What practical steps should be taken in the campaign to convince the French to vote in favour of the EU constitution? How does one approach the gathering of data on pronunciation change in medieval times? Instructive presentations aim to increase the audience's skills in a particular field. They are similar to persuasive presentations, only this time the arguments are rarely disputed. The speaker's authority is beyond question and the audience tends not to question the facts or arguments, but to concentrate on trying to absorb them.

When you give instructions, you will face the challenges of being very clear (you do not want your audience to make mistakes), of knowing in advance what your audience already knows about your subject, and of making visuals that are detailed enough to be complete yet simple and uncluttered enough to be understood quickly.

2.2　Step 2: Identify your audience

The next step in focussing your presentation is finding out about your audience. Many presentations go wrong because speakers fail to analyse their audience and give the wrong presentation to the wrong people in the wrong language.

Successful speakers will ask themselves questions about the context of their talk. Who are these people? Do I know them? How old are they? Where are they from? Are they specialists in my field, or laymen? How big is the group? Do they want to be here or have they been told to come (e.g., a compulsory lecture series for students)? Are they predominantly male or female, or a mix? Where and at what time will the presentation take place?

The answers to these questions will have implications for your communicative strategy. Clearly, a group of first-year students is less familiar with your jargon than a group of PhD students from your own field. You will need to adapt your anecdotes and your examples; you may need to explain the maths, the terminology, recent developments in the field, or anything else that will help your audience understand your presentation. A group of three hundred people has different dynamics than a group of ten, which will certainly influence the way you communicate with them. This means that if you present the same subject with the same purpose to three different audiences you will have to create three different presentations. It also means that not all goals are equally attainable with every audience.

The more uniform an audience is, the easier it is to adjust your presentation to them. If the people in your audience have a great deal in common, this makes it relatively easy, for instance, to think of examples that everybody will relate to. The larger the common frame of reference, the more shortcuts you can make and the more jargon you can use.

The real trouble starts when you have a mixed audience: they will have less in common and share a smaller common frame of reference. So now what do you do? Do you adapt your presentation to any particular group? If so, which group should that be? Do you forget about the rest of the audience or do you try to include them? Of course we cannot answer that question for you, because the answer will vary with the situation. You will have to make a sensible decision each time.

> A creative solution to the problem of addressing mixed audiences can be found in the way some universities organise the public defence of a PhD thesis. Most of the audience will not understand the defence of the thesis, which consists, after all, of specialists speaking jargon to each other. Some universities therefore allow the PhD candidate to give a public presentation explaining in layman's terms what the PhD project involved *before* the actual defence.

If you are going to talk to an international audience, be aware that you will have to be extra careful. There are many unexpected ways in which you can unwittingly insult people with different cultural backgrounds. And even if you haven't insulted them, international audiences may react to your presentation in unexpected and unwelcome ways. To help you cope with this, Chapter 5.7 will address aspects of giving presentations across cultural boundaries.

2.3   Step 3: Decide on structure and content

Now that you know the purpose of your presentation and who is in your audience, it is time to think about *what* you are going to say and *how* you are going to say it.

Let us start with the obvious. Essentially, all presentations have an introduction, a body and a conclusion. It is as simple as that. In the introduction you tell your audience what you are going to tell them; in the body you tell them; in the conclusion you tell them what you have told them. Unsurprisingly, this is generally known as the 'tell them technique'.

The structure you use depends primarily on the purpose of your presentation. If you want to describe the design process of a new submarine, you will use a different structure than you would for validating the criteria you

used during the design process. If you want to explain the criteria for dative movement in English, you will use a different structure than you would for showing that your theory of grammar is better able than another specified theory to account for the way the dative functions in English. When you are preparing your presentation, consider what main points you want to make – are you describing, arguing, explaining or comparing? Then decide what support you will offer for each point, and in what order you need to present them.

Perhaps the following outline will help you get the idea:

Purpose				
Introduction	**Main point 1**	**Main point 2**	**Main point 3**	**Conclusion**
Welcome				Rephrase purpose
Anecdote/story	Supporting point 1a	Supporting point 2a	Supporting point 3a	
Purpose				Recapitulate main points
What can you expect in the next 10 minutes?	Supporting point 1b	Supporting point 2b	Supporting point 3b	Conclusions 1 2
		Supporting point 2c	Supporting point 3c	Wrap-up

Figure 2.1
Outlining your presentation

As we said in Chapter 2.2, you should adapt to your audience. This is true not only for the style of your presentation but also for the content. Some details or arguments will be more familiar to some groups and less to others. To some groups, the concept of nuclear fusion is everyday material and does not need to be explained; other groups are not so lucky. Some audiences will be familiar with the friendship and collaboration between the 15/16th century philosophers Thomas More and Desiderius Erasmus; others will not. In other words, what information you should include and what information you can take for granted, depends on your audience.

Now is also the right moment to consider how much time is available for your talk. Time is usually limited, so you will have to use it wisely. There is only so much information you can squeeze into a fifteen-minute presentation and anyway, you do not want to sound as if you need to catch a train. In other words, consider carefully whether the purpose of your presentation can be achieved within the time available, taking into account the number of points you will have to make for this particular audience.

> **Timing**
>
> Too often, speakers present too much background before they reach the data they really want to analyse. If your thesis question is 'How has Germany's position in the EU changed since reunification?' do not spend two-thirds of your fifteen-minute presentation detailing Germany's position in Europe from World War I to reunification in 1990. Interesting as this may be, it will leave too little time for your analysis. Give any background that is essential: no more, no less. As a rule of thumb, aim to spend about one quarter of your time on background, half on the body and one quarter on the conclusions.

2.4   Step 4: Create your visuals

Now that you know *why* you are giving this presentation, *who* your audience are and exactly *what* you are going to say, you can decide what visuals you need, if any. It may be appropriate not to use visuals at all, to use visuals sparingly, or to make your visuals the main component of your presentation. There are no rules for this, and the decision is largely up to you, as long as you have good reasons for your choice and use your common sense.

If you apply common sense, you will realise that there is no point in bombarding your audience with videos, visual effects, sound effects, and ordinary sound (you) all at the same time. Neither is it useful to make a PowerPoint presentation simply because you think that is the standard thing to do. Sometimes it is even counterproductive. For instance, one of our students had a model of an artificial hand in his office and he decided that he wanted to show us why its design was revolutionary. He spent hours taking photographs of this model from every angle and incorporating them into a PowerPoint. Unfortunately it did not work, because it is very difficult to see detail in a projection of photographs, even if they look fine on a computer

screen. If he had simply brought the model to the presentation he would not have had that problem. If the hand had been too small or the audience too large, he might have used drawings of the design. Drawings project quite well on a large screen, provided that the lines are thick enough.

Chapter 4 will deal with visuals in more detail, explaining their functions and possibilities, as well as the problems they may pose.

2.5   Step 5: Make speaking notes

In 1963, shortly after East Germany had erected the Berlin Wall as a barrier between East and West, President John F. Kennedy, who was known to be a great public speaker, gave a speech in Berlin supporting West Germany. His speech included some Latin and German phrases, which worried him a bit. Not wanting to make a fool of himself, Kennedy wrote the phrases phonetically on a system card (see Figure 2.2). This way he could simply read aloud from his paper and sound (almost) German, to great effect. The speech is still remembered today as one of the greatest speeches in modern history. A video of the entire speech, showing Kennedy clutching his speaking notes, can be found on YouTube.
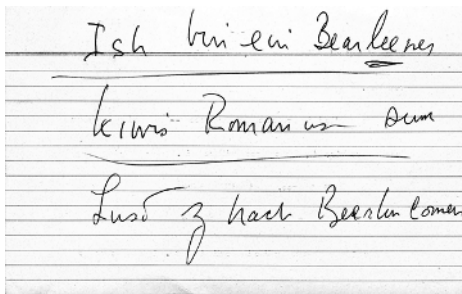

Figure 2.2
The system card that Kennedy used

Ish bin ein Bearleener (Ich bin ein Berliner = I am a citizen of Berlin)
kiwis Romanus sum (Civis Romanus sum = I am a citizen of Rome)
Lusd z nach Bearleen comen (Last sie nach Berlin kommen = Let them come to Berlin)

Some people think that these are the only speaking notes Kennedy had, which is a romantic idea, but not true. In fact, Kennedy had prepared a complete, word-for-word transcript which he had memorised and practised so that he could give the speech without having to read. The point is that Kennedy realised that he was going to get into trouble with his German pronunciation, and he took appropriate action. Being the excellent speaker that he was, he knew that preparation also means anticipating your weaknesses and dealing with them.

You are not writing important political speeches, and there is no need for you to write out word for word what you are going to say. In fact, using such a complete transcript will most likely cause you to *read* to your audience instead of *talking* to them. Some people make transcripts because they are afraid they will forget something if they do not. To avoid this, you can simply use the outline we introduced in Chapter 2.3 and copy each point onto system cards. Use one card for each major point and indicate the minor points underneath, adding any extra information you think you will need. Use key words only, so that you will not be tempted to read from your cards. Make sure that you anticipate, like Kennedy, the parts of your presentation that you feel are difficult.

2.6   Step 6: Practise!

Paradoxically, experienced speakers, including professionals like politicians, talk show hosts and priests, tend to practise their presentations more often than inexperienced speakers. Experience has taught them how embarrassing it is to lose track halfway, to forget what a visual was supposed to illustrate, and to run out of time halfway the presentation. And they realise that the only thing that stands between them and disaster is practice.

Practise! Use a timer to see how long you need. You may notice that what you thought would take fifteen minutes actually takes thirty – which you really would not want to find out in front of an audience, who would be thoroughly annoyed if you talked right through their coffee break. With a bit of practice it is possible to time your presentation quite accurately.

Practise! Stand up, talk out loud, and use your visuals. If you are using PowerPoint, make sure it is in Presentation mode to see whether the pic-

tures do what you expect them to do. Pay particular attention to the introduction, the transitions between major and minor points, and the conclusion.

Practise! Ask your friends to listen to your presentation and give you feedback on specific points. Do not ask them simply to listen to your presentation and tell you what they think about it, because you know in advance exactly what they will tell you: 'Nice!' This is not particularly helpful. Instead, suggest specific things for them to focus on, such as timing, logic, clarity, melody, annoying twitches or filler words – especially anything that you are insecure about.

The need to practise has one serious consequence: you need to schedule your preparation time efficiently. Starting to write your presentation the evening before and working on the content through the night will give you precious little time to practise and adjust your talk. So start on time, and schedule time for practising and editing your presentation.

If you can handle it, record or film yourself. Then watch or listen, and try to see your presentation through the eyes of your potential audience. This method of preparation has been known to be quite an eye-opener, in the most positive sense of the word. After seeing themselves on video, many speakers have taught themselves to speak more clearly, to pause more, to make better use of gestures or to drop distracting or annoying habits.

Structure

Theories about how best to structure your presentation and how to target your audience are as old as the hills. Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, written in the fourth century BC, is one of the earliest extant texts which discuss ways of persuading an audience, and Aristotle's views are still valid today. He distinguishes three main styles of arguing: through *pathos*, i.e., by trying to engage the emotions of your audience; through *ethos*, i.e., by convincing your audience that you are a person they can trust; and through *logos*, i.e., by appealing to the logic of your arguments.

Pathos is a technique we frequently come across in advertising and political speeches. Advertisers try to sell products by linking them to positive feelings and associations like family life, being 'cool', sex, etc. Politicians often make use of emotions, trying to convince their audiences to vote for them by appealing to their love of their country, their pride in their achievements, their feelings of solidarity for people in need, etc.

In academic presentations, *pathos* would seem slightly out of place. Academia is per definition the realm of the mind, of logic, and one would hope that academic audiences are not going to be swayed by emotional appeals. Be that as it may, if you do not show any passion for your subject or commitment to your new technique, theory or design, your audience may wonder why they should believe you. No audience is free of emotion, not even an academic one. So even though it may be out of place for you to actively appeal to your audience's emotions, it will definitely do no harm to show them the strength of your convictions, and your commitment to what you are saying. And this will often depend less on what you are saying than on how you say it: forcefully and enthusiastically.

Ethos, on the other hand, is important in academia. It involves your credibility as a speaker. To be convinced by what you say, your audience first has to be satisfied that you are a reliable source: a scientist/scholar/student with the right academic credentials, who has done work in the relevant

field. They need to know that you are 'one of their own'. For instance, to have anything relevant to say to generative grammarians you need to be a *generative* grammarian and not a *functional* grammarian. Cross-pollination in these fields does not usually work. Also, the better your reputation as a scientist, the more the audience will accept your judgement. A widely-cited professor will have more automatic authority than a PhD student. The place to establish your credibility is in the introduction to your presentation.

Although *pathos* and *ethos* have a role to play, most of your presentation will be based on *logos*: the appeal to reason. This is the core business of an academic presentation. You will make an assertion, present a hypothesis, and then present facts that will convince your audience of the truth of your assertions. That is what academia is built on: sound argumentation based on the analysis of verifiable facts to prove the value of a theory. In the body of your presentation, you will give your audience the facts that lead inescapably to your conclusions. You will present these facts clearly and systematically, so that the audience can see how one fact builds on the other. And you will show how, taken together, the facts argue in favour of your theory.

So how do you go about doing this? We will discuss how to structure your presentation convincingly, with a clear introduction, a well-organised body and a convincing conclusion.

3.1   The introduction

In Chapter 2.3 we introduced the 'tell them technique' of saying everything three times: once in the introduction to your talk, announcing the main points of your presentation, once in the body, dealing with each main point in detail, and once in the conclusion, reiterating the most important points. In this section we will discuss the first of these: the introduction.

The old saying 'you never get a second chance to make a first impression' very much applies to presentations. At a presentation there are – with a bit of luck – a hundred people in the audience, all simultaneously getting a first impression of you. A bad first impression will lower their expectations, since most audiences know from experience that a presentation with a clumsy or badly organised beginning hardly ever improves later on. So