



How to Give Better Presentations

Based on a lecture by [Dr. Edward Tufte](#)

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This page is meant to help people of all kinds to make better presentations. This includes students making presentations in class, professors teaching a class, people presenting research results, and professionals presenting ideas in a business environment.

The ideas here are based on those presented by Dr. Tufte in his course "Presenting Data and Information" on March 9, 2000 at the Fairmont Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston. As an indication of how well he implements these ideas, he kept the attention of a crowd of 500 people through FIVE HOURS of lectures. He dimmed the lights and played a lullaby at the end, and nobody fell asleep. Now, THAT is an effective presentation!

A few days after I created the site, musician and music professor Livingston Taylor was a guest on WBUR's *The Connection*. His topic: [The Art of Live Performance](#). Visit the program web site to hear the one-hour program and/or to explore some written material on the subject. Taylor and host Christopher Lydon explore many of the ideas below - especially about respecting one's audience - in the context of musical performance.

1. Show up early

Showing up early can lead to a variety of improvements in the presentation. First, it can help the speaker to solve unexpected problems with lighting, room assignments, equipment, and so forth. Second, people tend to trickle into meetings, but to leave abruptly, so the time leading up to the presentation is a good time to get to know at least some of the audience members in advance, to develop rapport with them, and to promote one's cause (see item 2). It is also a chance to distribute handouts (see item 4).

2. State the problem

Early in the presentation, the speaker should let the audience know what problem needs to be addressed, and how the information being presented will be important in that process.

3. Particular - General - Particular

Give the audience a very specific story or example with which they can identify, and then show how that relates to a more general concept. Then show them how that concept can be applied in other particular situations. By presenting both the general and the specific, a speaker can help motivate the audience to listen to the presentation (or to read -- this can be applied in written reports as well).

4. Leave traces

Give everyone in the audience at least one piece of paper, both to jog their memory later and -- more importantly -- to convey some credibility. For this reason, the paper should have the speaker's name on it, so that the audience knows the speaker is holding him- or herself accountable for the information.

The information density of the paper handout can be great. That is, a large amount of information can be included, particularly if it is designed well. See Dr. Tufte's books ([below](#)) for suggestions.

5. Match the audience

Think about what the audience reads, and try to match the information density of that material. That is, if the audience is used to reading high-density material, do not bore them with cartoons. The opposite is true. As a faculty member, I would suggest a corollary rule, which is to encourage students to increase the [level of the material they read](#).

6. Avoid overheads, PowerPoint, and bullet lists

This is Professor Tufte's idea, and I am still struggling with it, because I use all of these. I do not fully agree, but his reason for this suggestion deserves careful consideration, although it tends to contradict point 5 above. People have become increasingly accustomed - perhaps addicted -- to receiving information in very small packets. Political soundbites, three-column-inch stories in *USA Today*, 21-minute television "news" programs, and 30-second advertisements are just a few examples. Collectively, these contribute to a softening of analytical abilities a tendency to oversimplify complex problems. Overuse of bullets can contribute to a tendency to skim over details and complexities. Providing more nuanced information in writing (see item 4) can help the audience to probe more deeply.

It is ironic, of course, that Dr. Tufte suggests avoiding lists in presentations, as part of a list in his presentation. It is good to have foibles!

7. Respect the audience

Do not oversimplify; it shows disdain for the audience. Whatever group is in front of you (or is reading your written work), it has been winnowed down from all the world's people by a complicated and elaborate process. This audience deserves your utmost respect and should be treated with the respect afforded your peers. Dr. Tufte gave the example of a technical manual he was helping to edit. One of the authors told him, "We had to dumb this down for Suzie Secretary." Once Dr. Tufte observed the contempt this writer showed for his audience, he was better able to understand why the manual was so terrible. He added that some lawyers lose cases because jury members feel they are being talked down to.

8. Use humor, but use it wisely

Humor that is carefully woven into a presentation can be like a bell that the speaker can ring from time to time, keeping the audience's interest building rapport.

Humor that is disrespectful or reveals prejudices such as racism, sexism, homophobia, or religious intolerance must, however, be avoided at all costs (see item 7). It can alienate audiences without good reason. Audiences should be alienated only on the basis of the content! (See item 10.)

9. Avoid "he" when referring to people in general

About half of all people are female. The use of Man, he, him, and so forth to refer to people is alienating, archaic, and imprecise. Some people continue to use "he" only because of the awkwardness of using constructions such as "he and/or she" or "one." Although some such constructions are still required in written work, Dr. Tufte indicates that such constructions as

"Each student should complete their reading."

are acceptable in spoken English, and have been recognized as such by the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) for 250 years.

10. Believe the presentation

The presentation will not be convincing if the speaker does not exhibit conviction. Although it is important to be respectful of the audience, it is not useful to "soft pedal" or conceal one's views. State the case clearly and offer the strongest support for it. People can then choose to agree or disagree on the merits. Step out of the "stage" persona to talk directly with the audience.

11. Finish early

The greater one's preparation (see item 12), the shorter the presentation can be. Audiences rarely leave a meeting saying, "That was very good, but I wish the speaker had gone on for 20 more minutes." Finishing early leaves more time for questions, and shows appreciation and respect for the time the audience members have taken to attend.

12. Practice

A good presentation is hard work. Spend time researching, writing, and honing the presentation. Talk in front of a mirror, a friend, or a pet -- both to get more relaxed and to reveal redundant or problematic passages.

13. Hydrate

Two of the most dehydrating experiences in modern life are flying in airplanes and giving presentations (all of that water vapor escaping through the open mouth really is important). People who fly from place to place giving presentations or who give presentations often should continually replenish fluids. Water is best, juice is next best. Alcohol and caffeine cause further dehydration, and should be offset by even more water. Water is useful during the presentation, to preserve the voice.

14. CONTENT

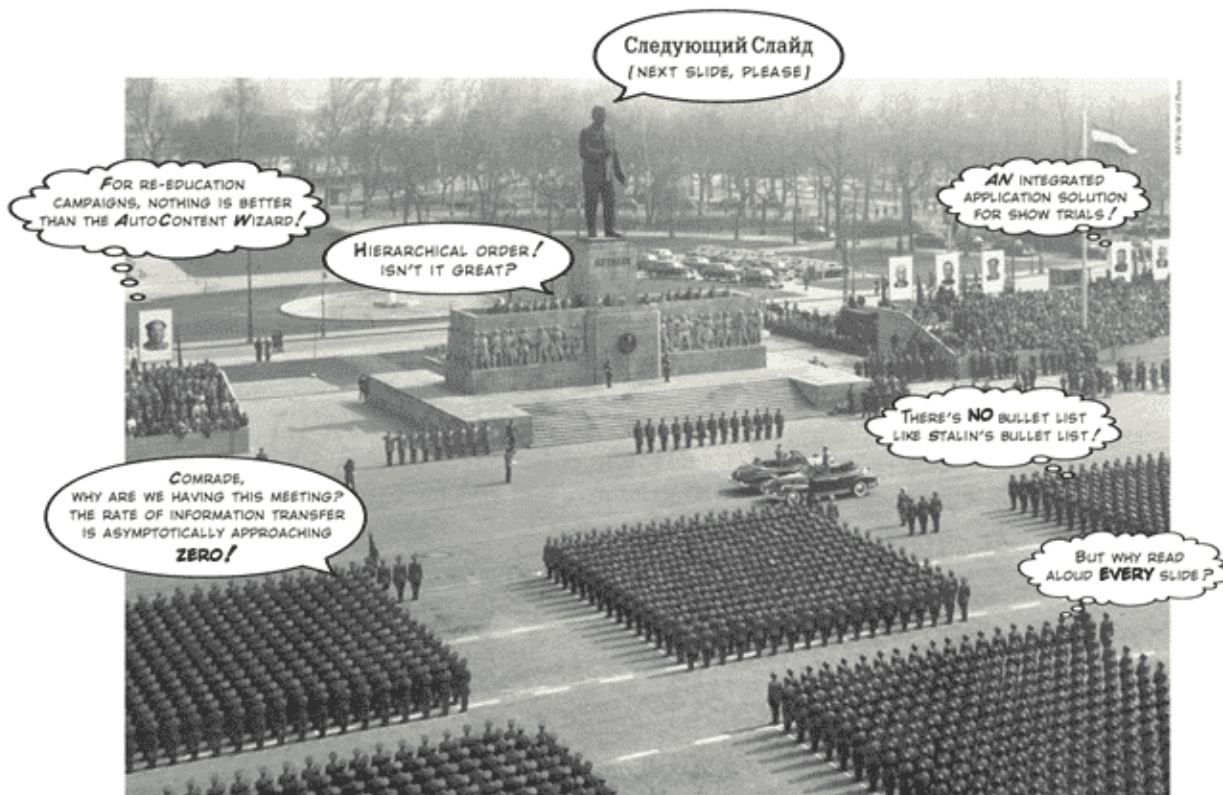
Points 1 through 13 are of no value apart from the quality, relevance, and integrity of the content being presented.

Bibliography

All of the titles below are recommended for anyone wishing to improve teaching or other professional presentations. The most important and

Edward R. Tufte

The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint: Pitching Out Corrupts Within



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