

***Preparing an important presentation? Whether your audience is a small group of colleagues or a larger gathering of clients, this guide will give you the practical advice you need to master public speaking. You'll learn how to:***

- **Shape your information to specifically address your audience's needs**
- **Prepare visual aids that develop, rather than distract from, your points**
- **Overcome stage fright**
- **Grab your listeners' attention and hold it**

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# **Guide to Persuasive Presentations**

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# The Basic Presentation Checklist

Here's how to prepare and deliver that next speech effectively

**In a perfect world**, you would have learned about the presentation months ago. Your personal assistant would have spent weeks researching startling factoids about the topic. And you'd be sitting down well in advance of the event with hours to spend preparing your presentation.

Instead, the reality usually is last-minute. You're pulling together material on the fly from a number of old talks and hoping no one will notice that the whole hasn't really been thought through.

But you can improve that all-too-typical experience with this basic checklist of the necessary steps for a successful presentation. Following these steps won't give you a less hectic schedule, but they can ensure that you don't miss something obvious the next time you have to talk in public.

**1. Develop the elevator speech.** The first step is the most important and the most often ignored. Here's how it works. You're on the elevator riding down from your room to the mezzanine floor where the conference is going on. The person standing next to you sees your name badge and says, "Oh, I was thinking of attending your talk. What's it about?" You've got less than 30 seconds to tell her. What do you say?

You need to craft one sentence that answers that question. The answer should clearly contain the benefit that the listener will derive from the speech. For example, President Kennedy might have said, "My inaugural address is about how we can strengthen America and defeat world communism by working together on behalf of freedom at home and abroad." The thought process will often be difficult, but it will help you focus your thinking about what you want to say.

**Match the need that the audience has to act on its new knowledge with some specific suggestions about what to do.**

**2. Figure out the question to which your information is the answer.** At the heart of your presentation is a body of information that you and you alone have. That's why you've been invited to speak. But you can't begin by simply dumping that data on your audience. Listeners come to a presentation asking, "Why are we here?" That's the question you need to answer first. So reason backwards. Look at what you want to say—the information you have—and figure out what question the audience would have to have in mind in order to make that information a fascinating, provocative answer.

You need to spend approximately the first third of your speech asking that question—more if the question is not well understood by the audience, less if it is. You may have to do some research. Here's where you reveal to the audience the startling facts and interesting trends that will establish you as someone in the know and create a need for your listeners to hear your answer.

In Kennedy's case, he had to spend some time at the beginning of the address establishing the threat of world communism in order for his response—a strong national defense and the Peace Corps—to be interesting to his listeners. Because the threat was already widely subscribed to by the American people in 1961, Kennedy could deal with it quickly.

**3. Create the opener.** Now you need to develop the opening story or anecdote—or question or factoid or statistic—that will establish the topic of your talk and grab the listeners' interest in a very few words. This section of the talk should take no more than a couple of minutes. Think of it as the speech in brief. You don't want to give away your whole talk, but you do want to both orient and tease your listeners so that they have some idea of what's coming and want to hear more. Pointed, carefully crafted personal anecdotes work best when they don't contain any irrelevant information. Jokes are usually not a good idea—you're at your most nervous moment in the presentation, and punch lines are always hard to deliver well. The opportunities for screwing up are legion.

An exception to that rule—justifiable perhaps because the speaker was a humorist—comes from the brilliant opening of Art Buchwald's graduation speech to Catholic University's Columbus School of Law in 1977. It's actually a personal anecdote and a joke.

"I am no stranger to the bar. I first became interested in the law when I was working in Paris for the *Herald Tribune*, and I covered a trial which had to do with a couple caught in a very compromising situation in a Volkswagen. Now, everyone in France was interested in the case because it had to do with such a small car. The defense lawyer argued it was impossible to do what the couple had been accused of doing in a Volkswagen. The judge said he didn't know if this was true or not, so he appointed a commission to study it. It took them six months to render their verdict, and they said 'it was possible but very difficult.'" Confident that he had captured his audience's attention, Buchwald went on to deliver his speech.

**4. Craft the ending.** You're almost done. Now you need to create an ending for the speech that is not a summary—that's boring—but rather gives the audience something to do with the information you've imparted. To return to Kennedy, he asked his listeners to join the Peace Corps or work on behalf of freedom around the world in the famous phrase, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Few of us get the chance to ask our audiences to do something that exciting, but we do owe them our best efforts toward real action, because audiences tend to remember what comes last in a presentation. The point is to match the need that the audience has to act on its new knowledge with some specific suggestions about what to do. The device also helps cement the memory of what the speech was about. Mere summaries cause listeners to tune out.

**5. Put it all together and eliminate the extraneous.** Now you're ready to take the pieces and assemble them into a compelling whole. Put the opener, the question section, the answer section, and the ending together, and use the elevator speech to eliminate everything that doesn't pertain to the topic. Most presentations try to cover too much rather than too little, and end up boring and overwhelming listeners with extraneous material. Be ruthless. No one ever protested because a presentation ended a little early.

**6. Rehearse, preferably in the room.** Nothing beats a dress rehearsal. You'll find out where the holes are, and what doesn't make sense. Invite a few colleagues to listen if the presentation is an important one, so that you can get the sense of what it's like to perform in front of an audience.

Ask them not to interrupt, but rather save their questions and comments until you're done, so that you can get a sense of timing and pacing.

**7. Check the location and the technology.**

Just before the event, get into the room where the talk will be held if you haven't already, and see how things look from the speaker's stand. Test your technology out, and ask someone to stand in the back of the room to see how well you can be heard. If there is bright lighting, get a feel for how that affects your ability to see your notes. The more familiar you are with the surroundings, the less you will be thrown off stride when the actual moment comes.

**8. When the time comes, be ready.** Shortly before you start, check your appearance in a mirror. If you're the nervous type, spend the time until you're "on" giving yourself a pep talk. Tell yourself that you've prepared thoroughly, that the material is good, and that the audience wants you to succeed. Re-label physical symptoms of nervousness, which everyone has, as the adrenaline necessary to help you succeed with sufficient energy. Don't allow yourself to get trapped in the vicious cycle of thinking, "I'm nervous because I'm going to fail because I'm nervous...." This thought progression is self-fulfilling and self-defeating. Instead, look at the audience face by face, and tell yourself, "that person looks friendly. I could talk to her. That one reminds me of my uncle, and he always liked me." When the moment finally arrives, take a deep breath, smile, and have fun.

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This article originally appeared in *Harvard Management Communication Letter* (product #C0010B). To order, visit [hbr.org](http://hbr.org).



# How to Make Your Case in 30 Seconds or Less

**An elevator pitch can help capture an investor's attention, open the door to a job, or win vital support for a new project.**

**by Nick Wreden**

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**In 1994**, Barnett Helzberg, Jr. was walking by The Plaza Hotel in New York City when he heard a woman hail Warren Buffett. Helzberg approached the legendary investor and said, “Hi, Mr. Buffett. I’m a shareholder in Berkshire Hathaway and a great admirer of yours. I believe that my company matches your criteria for investment.”

“Send me more details,” Buffett replied. A year later, Helzberg sold his chain of 143 diamond stores to Buffett.

Helzberg’s story is a classic example of a powerful elevator pitch. An elevator pitch gets its name from the 30-second opportunity to tell—and sell—your story during a three- or four-story elevator ride. The 30-second parameter is based on the typical attention span, according to the book *How to Get Your Point Across in 30 Seconds or Less* (Pocket Books, 1990) by Milo O. Frank. It’s one reason why the standard commercial or television “sound bite” lasts 30 seconds.

While elevator pitches are often associated with funding requests, they can be valuable every day. Job interviews, networking events, public relations opportunities, presentations to executives, and sales all demand the ability to successfully deliver a quick and concise explanation of your case.

A 30-second elevator speech quickly demonstrates that you know your business and can communicate it effectively. Yes, a lot of important facts may be left out, but today everyone is skilled at judging relevancy and making decisions with incomplete data. In fact, 15 seconds can be more powerful

## Have Two—or Ten—Minutes?

Elevator pitches can also form the building blocks of longer presentations. Milo O. Frank, author of *How to Get Your Point Across in 30 Seconds or Less*, suggests looking at each of the points in an extended presentation as individual 30-second messages. “During the two, three, five, or ten minutes that your speech lasts, you’ll have an opportunity to ask—and answer—several provocative questions, paint more than one picture, use more than one personal anecdote or experience. The strategies that kept your listener alert and interested in your 30-second message will achieve the same effect in a longer speech,” says Frank.

than 30 seconds. “The more succinct you are, the more successful you will be,” says Dr. Alan Weiss, president of Summit Consulting Group in East Greenwich, R.I.

The secret of strong elevator pitches consists of grabbing the attention of listeners, convincing them with the promise of mutual benefit, and setting the stage for follow-up. Speak in terms your audience can relate to. And communicate with the passion that comes from knowing that this opportunity may never come again. How often do you see Warren Buffett on the street?

Key tips include:

**Know the goal.** The goal of an elevator pitch is not to get funding, a job, or project sign-off. It’s to get approval to proceed to the next step, whether it’s accepting a phone call, a referral to the right person, or a chance to send additional information. Says Ken Yancey, the CEO of SCORE, an SBA resource partner made up of retired and active volunteers who help small businesses: “Rarely are you closing a sale. Instead, you are opening the door to the next step.” Whatever the goal is, follow through.

**Know the subject.** Do you know your topic well enough to describe it in a single sentence? It’s harder than it sounds. As Mark Twain pointed out, “I didn’t have time to write you a short letter, so I wrote you a long one.” Knowing your subject well also gives you the ability to stand out from others who might be doing something similar. The issue, as always, is less what you do, and more what you can do for somebody. “I’m a real estate agent” is not as powerful as saying “I am a real estate agent who specializes in helping first-time buyers like you buy great homes in this town.”

**Know the audience.** “The worst pitches come from those who don’t know my organization or how we operate. Pitching me on something that just isn’t possible wastes both my time and theirs,” says Yancey. Before going to a conference, he identifies and does research on the individuals he wants to meet. Then he tailors his elevator pitch to match his audience’s requirements. “If people don’t hear a benefit for them, they won’t listen to you,” says Yancey.

**Organize the pitch.** “Some people are blessed with charisma and persuasiveness,” says Dave Power, a marketing partner at Charles River Ventures, a venture capital firm in Waltham, Mass. “We all aren’t that lucky. But you can still be very effective by focusing on what is meaningful. You have to organize the flow of information to make it as easy as possible for the brain to digest.” Typically, elevator pitches start with an introduction, move into a description of the problem, outline potential benefits for the listener, and conclude with a request for permission to proceed to the next step in the relationship.

**Hook them from the opening.** You have to make an immediate connection with the audience. This connection signals that it’s worth investing valuable time to hear what you have to say. Weiss suggests starting with a provocative, contrarian, or counterintuitive statement that will rev pulses. One example: “Quality doesn’t matter.”

**Plug into the connection.** Once you have the attention of your audience, deliver your message. Clarity is more powerful than jargon. Use analogies the audience can relate to. Power once had to explain a new technology called “strong authentication.” He held up an ATM card. “Every time you use this card with a PIN code, you are using strong authentication,” he said. The audience instantly understood that strong authentication involved multiple levels of security. Personalize your message by relating your solution to audience needs. Emotional appeals are also powerful.

**Presentation matters.** It’s natural to want to speak at an auctioneer’s tempo. But rapid-fire delivery rarely conveys confidence and command. In fact, a timely pause is an effective attention-getter. “It gives emphasis to what you’re saying. It gives you time to think. It gives your listener an opportunity to hear, absorb, and retain what you’re saying,” writes Frank.

**Incorporate feedback.** Use video to evaluate your own performance. Give the pitch to someone unfamiliar with your project. If she gets lost in jargon or fails to see the potential benefit, chances are that your target audience will stumble, too.

The benefits of elevator pitches extend beyond persuading your audience. They can help focus your thinking and writing. They can ultimately increase your productivity, allowing you to communicate your message to more people.

Employees shouldn't stumble when asked, "what does your company do?" or "how can we help?" An effective elevator pitch can outline win-win objectives, and establish a launch pad for a deeper relationship—converting a chance meeting into an opportunity.

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This article originally appeared in *Harvard Management Communication Letter* (product #C0201E). To order, visit [hbr.org](http://hbr.org).



# Coping with Stagefright

## How to turn terror into dynamic speaking

by John Daly and Isa Engleberg

**You're about to make** an important presentation. People are streaming into the room. Your boss is sitting up front. Important clients are sitting in the second row. Your boss stands to introduce you and you walk toward the stage.

As you approach the front of the room your confidence wanes. Your stomach starts doing somersaults, your palms are sweating, and your mouth feels parched. You pick up your notes and your hands are shaking. Thank goodness, you say to yourself, for the lectern. As you start to speak you hear your voice quiver and you feel your skin beginning to blush.

Welcome to the world of stagefright!

You are not alone if you have had this experience. Almost everyone has. Even people who regularly appear in front of large audiences experience stagefright. The great American actress Helen Hayes was known for throwing up in her dressing room before every single performance during a career of more than 50 years. Luckily, researchers in communication and psychology have identified several strategies that can help you overcome your nervousness.

### **Preparation is critical**

**Know your audience and setting.** Successful speakers know it is critical to acquaint themselves with both the audience and the setting before making a presentation. Talk to a few people who will be in the audience. Ask who else will be attending and what interests them. Find out what audience

## 20 Strategies for Reducing Stagefright

- ✓ Understand that your listeners want you to do well.
- ✓ Believe you know more than your audience.
- ✓ Familiarize yourself with the setting.
- ✓ Get to know some members of the audience before you speak.
- ✓ Choose topics you know something about.
- ✓ Prepare your message; indeed, overprepare.
- ✓ Imagine questions that might be asked.
- ✓ Memorize the first and last minutes of your presentation.
- ✓ Focus on your audience, not on yourself.
- ✓ Don't practice in front of a mirror.
- ✓ Never tell the audience you are nervous.
- ✓ Label your physiological excitement as positive rather than negative.
- ✓ Talk positively about your presentation to yourself.
- ✓ Turn your energy into something positive.
- ✓ Get rid of your "rigid" rules about speaking.
- ✓ Be flexible and adaptive during your presentation.
- ✓ Understand that no presentation is "that important."
- ✓ Remember that you are not a good judge of how nervous you appear.
- ✓ Believe compliments on your presentation.
- ✓ Think! Plan ahead to avoid problems.

members know about the topic. Discover ways this audience is similar to, and different from, other groups you have addressed.

Just as important, look over the setting before your presentation. Find out where you will be speaking and get there early. Check the room's acoustics, sit in a chair and see the room from the audience's perspective. Test all the equipment. Assume nothing.

**Prepare your material.** Never underestimate how important good preparation is to reducing your anxiety. When you know what you want to accomplish, what you are going to say, and how you are going to say it, you will be less anxious.

Mark Twain claimed it took him three weeks to prepare an "impromptu" speech. Another great speaker, Winston Churchill, said it took him six to eight hours to prepare a 45-minute presentation. Here are four rules for preparing your presentation.

**1. Know your topic.** Audiences can sense when you are bluffing, and when they feel you are unsure of your material, they lose confidence in you. Being unprepared also makes you, the speaker, anxious. You have concerns about unanswerable questions; you worry you don't have enough to say; you fear you are wrong about something. Avoid these anxiety-producing thoughts by being the expert.

**2. Prepare more material than you think you will use.** If you have to give a five-minute presentation, develop enough material for 15 minutes. It's better to pare down than to run out of things to say.

**3. Imagine questions people might ask.** Come up with answers before you give your speech. Either incorporate the answers into your presentation or hold them in readiness in case those questions are asked. Savvy corporate leaders and public officials use this technique when planning to meet the press. A day or two before the press conference, leaders are briefed by staff about likely questions and possible answers. That review makes them more confident. They feel better prepared.

**4. Memorize the first minute of your presentation.** You experience your greatest anxiety at the beginning of a speech. Having the start of your presentation memorized makes you more comfortable. You also may want to memorize the last minute of your presentation in order to conclude with conviction.

### **Focus on your audience, not on yourself**

Most of us do not like to feel conspicuous. When you talk to a group of 20 people, there are 40 eyes staring at you. If you start thinking about all this attention, you may begin to focus on how you look and sound rather than on communicating your message to your listeners. Your attention shifts from your audience to yourself. When you become self-focused, your stagefright increases and the quality of your performance suffers.

Television broadcasters know this. In studios

they avoid looking at monitors while the camera is on them. If they watch themselves, they'll be distracted. Some public-speaking books suggest that you practice in front of a mirror. Bad advice! Try it and you will see why. When you start talking, you'll notice your facial expressions, your hair, and your gestures. And, you'll think little about your presentation.

What should you do when you feel self-conscious during a presentation? Talk to individual listeners. Pick out a person. Tell yourself that you are going to talk right at him until he begins to smile. Smile and you'll find that he'll probably smile back. Then, move to another audience member and think, "I'm going to talk directly to this person until she nods her head." As you talk, start nodding your head and watch as she reciprocates. What you are doing is shifting your attention away from yourself and onto the audience.

### **Relabel your physical symptoms positively**

Much like an athlete getting ready for a big game, your body gets "up" when you make a speech: your heart beats faster, your palms get sweaty, your legs seem a little wobbly. When experiencing these feelings, some people think, "I'm scared." Other people say to themselves, "I'm excited." Physiologically, there is little difference between fear and excitement. The real difference lies in what you call it.

Think of something adventurous you do—riding a roller coaster, scuba diving, a bicycle race. What are your feelings at the start? Many of these physiological reactions are no different from the ones you have when you start a presentation. The difference is that you call these activities fun while labeling presentations scary. Same physiology, different labels. So next time you start a speech, label the experience positively.

Labeling is only the first step. People who have a great deal of stagefright often talk themselves into being nervous: "This is going to be awful... Why am I up here?...I'm going to make a fool of myself...People are going to walk out...What if they hate me?" When you talk this way, you may begin to believe it. Experienced speakers convince themselves that they'll do a great job: "I'm going to be effective...This is exciting...What an opportunity...I know my stuff and I am going to convince this audience."

Use the energy you experience—don't be used by it. Before your presentation, walk around if you can, take some deep breaths, stretch. When you start your presentation, move, use gestures. Let your nervous energy animate your speech.

### **Avoid rigid rules**

People with stagefright often have very rigid rules about what makes a good presentation. One computer executive who often experienced stagefright told us that "every good speech starts with a joke." An anxious scientist believed that "all speeches should have three main points." A VP related that "every presentation must include color graphics." These speakers dearly loved their rules about speaking. Consequently, they were haunted by them. In truth, none of them are mandatory rules of good speaking. Is it possible to give an excellent presentation without any jokes? Sure. Do all excellent presentations have three major points? Of course not. And many outstanding briefings have no graphics at all.

Here's something else to think about: Most people are more comfortable answering questions in Q&A sessions than they are giving speeches. You'd think it would be the opposite. Presentations are prepared in advance. But it is difficult to prepare for every question: you think "on your feet" when answering questions. Sounds as though questions should be more nerve-wracking. But not so for most speakers. Why? Because people have far fewer rigid rules about question-answer sessions. On the other hand, almost everyone has strong rules about speeches. Be flexible. Drop the rigid rules!

### **Think before you speak**

Learn some simple ways to manage your anxiety. Think before you make a presentation so you can avoid or control what makes you nervous. For example, what if your hands shake when you speak? Place your hands on the lectern. Or suppose the notes you hold rattle as you speak? Why not put your notes on a clipboard? If you are so nervous that the clipboard shakes, lay the notes on a table or lectern. What if you blush when nervous? The blushing starts at your chest and slowly works up your neck. Why not wear a scarf or turtleneck that hides the blushing?

### **You don't look that nervous**

Has this happened to you? You finish a presentation and people come up and congratulate you. While you thank them for the compliments, you're thinking, "They're just being nice. They really think I did a lousy job. They could see I was shaking and sweating." Research tells us you're probably wrong: speakers are often inaccurate in their assessments of how nervous they appear. But these inaccurate perceptions feed stagefright. When you think you look anxious, you feel more apprehensive. And the cycle continues until it detrimentally affects your performance.

Reducing stagefright is not easy. It requires conscientious work on your part. You'll have to try the techniques we've described in front of real audiences. But, if you are well prepared and willing to discard your misconceptions about speaking, you can reduce and maybe even conquer your stagefright. And you will gain the flexibility and confidence to transform a fearful ordeal into an invigorating and successful experience.

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This article originally appeared in *Harvard Management Communication Letter* (product #C9906A). To order, visit [hbr.org](http://hbr.org).

# Presentations 101

## Don't make these common mistakes

by John Clayton

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**Inexperienced presenters** make two kinds of mistakes: the intelligent kind that all of us must work through, and the kind that is so obvious you just shake your head in disbelief.

Let's deal with the obvious ones first:

- **Reading from a script.** There's no faster way to lose your audience's attention. Instead, look up and establish a personal connection with the audience.
- **Hiding at the back of the room or behind a podium.** Let the audience see you and your body language.
- **Ignoring time constraints.** Don't try to give a 30-minute speech in a five-minute slot.
- **Going off on tangents.** Anecdotes can be powerful tools; just be sure to keep them relevant to your point.

Then there are the mistakes that require more sophisticated responses.

**1. Not knowing your audience.** In any communication task, you must understand what your audience needs to know. Your first step—long before you walk into the room—is to ask who the audience is and how they will use the information you provide. Then you can structure your presentation around those needs: pluses and minuses of a proposed strategy, overview of a new software package, or potential applications of the recent research.

In presentations, unlike in other forms of communication, your audience can and will give immediate feedback. Thus, the best presentations are interactive. At its most basic, interactivity comes in the form of a question or discussion time. More sophisticated—and usually more effective—are exercises

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**We have diagrams, charts, and maps in our heads. Why should you translate them into words and force your audience to translate them back to visuals?**

that focus audience activity on key issues. For example, get your audience to design solutions to real problems that they are facing.

You can also use interactivity to fine-tune some details. For example, a written report might include the caveat “We assume you are familiar with single-entry accounting.” But now you don’t have to assume. Instead, ask, “Is everyone here familiar with single-entry accounting?” Don’t forget to look around for their answers—and seek out the hesitant facial expressions of those who hate to admit their ignorance.

**2. Failing to grab your listeners’ attention.**

The audience arrives wondering: *Why should we care? Why is this important?* So, rather than jumping straight into the history of federal housing on Indian reservations, start by describing the current housing crisis. You get your listeners’ minds working (*How did this come about? How can we solve it?*) in ways that give them context for the historical discussion.

Usually the easiest way to hook the audience is to describe the problem you set out to solve—though if the audience is familiar with it, make the description brief. Other successful “grabbers” can be anecdotes (“When I opened a can of our company’s dog food last week, I discovered...”) or surprising facts (“Over half of our customers expect to buy a DVD player within the next six months”).

**3. Neglecting to provide a road map.** Once you’ve gotten the audience interested, they start wondering, “Where are we going?” If the terrain is complicated, they may need a road map. A “Table of Contents” slide will help them understand what you want to do. As you start each new section of the outline, return to that slide to help your audience understand where they are, where they’ve been, and where they’re going.

If your outline is simple, don’t waste precious time on lengthy explanations. Still, you may want to describe in one sentence what the audience will learn. “By the end of today’s presentation, I hope you will understand how online buying is shaping the industry, who the major players are, and where we should invest to compete.”

**4. Presenting without visual aids.** The five senses provide different pathways to people’s brains. Your presentation should transmit information to your audience through these

multiple pathways. Effects on smell, touch, and taste may be difficult to create—but visual aids are easy and powerful.

For many concepts—including relationships, flows, and spatial organization—we think visually. We have diagrams, charts, and maps in our heads. Why should you translate them into words and force your audience to translate them back to visuals?

Visual aids also trigger emotional responses (that’s why advertisers show attractive, happy people using their products). We are especially drawn to pictures of other people. So, for example, if you are proposing strategies to improve employee satisfaction, or if you are commending individuals such as this month’s sales leaders, use pictures to enhance the person-to-person aspects of communication.

By contrast, text-based visuals are barely better than no visuals at all. Because people can read faster than you can talk, they find nothing more boring than looking at a text-heavy slide as you read it aloud word-for-word. Visual aids should have objects, pictures, or diagrams combined with words; their effect should reinforce without repeating what you say aloud.

Similarly, visuals are usually best on a screen, not a handout. When you use a handout, people look at it instead of at you. You lose the audience focus and group dynamic. Handouts are good for listing procedures or providing properly spelled Web site addresses. But never hand out an article providing additional background—some people will read the handout instead of listening to you, and most will throw it away unread. Instead, let those who are interested come get it at the end of the presentation.

**5. Using visuals that don’t relate to your message.** Just as each paragraph you write should have a point, so should each visual aid. You express a paragraph’s point in the topic sentence; you express a visual aid’s point in its title. Why am I looking at this picture of smiling people? A title should tell me: “This initiative will increase employee satisfaction.” Your words should also integrate with the visual, perhaps including phrases such as “As you can see on the slide...”

Too often, a presenter will display a dense table of numbers, perhaps copied from another source. Which numbers should I look at? What trend do they illustrate? You should design and edit your

visual aids in much the same way you format and edit a document—continually thinking about the effect on the audience. Should key numbers in this table be boldfaced? Should it be a pie chart or stacked-bar chart instead? By asking such questions, you continually compare your visual aid to the message you want it to convey.

#### 6. Not letting visual aids do their work.

Presenters make fascinating mistakes with visual aids:

- Blocking the screen with their bodies
- Talking to the screen rather than the audience
- Displaying a slide for ten seconds or less—not enough time for its message to sink in

Since you spend so much time developing an effective slide, make sure you let it do its work while you do yours. Practice to make the following physical actions become second nature:

- Stand where most of the audience can see both you and the screen
- Glance at each slide to make sure it's correct, then turn to address the audience

- As you speak, check your audience's faces to see that the slide has registered with them

**7. Presenting without passion.** Despite an ever-growing array of communication options, presentations remain essential to the business world. Why? In part, a presentation allows interaction between audience and presenter, and among audience members who can develop team spirit. But mainly, a presentation is an in-person experience. It's not just your words and visuals that make your presentation, but *you*. The audience will judge your credibility, substance, and passion—and they've come to the presentation because they can best make those judgments in person.

When you stand up in front of a crowd, you must believe that you're telling them something important. When the audience feels your trust and faith in the topic—if you have been effective in communicating it—you pass the implicit test they came to this room to give you. Your presentation succeeds.

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This article originally appeared in *Harvard Management Communication Letter* (product #C0011B). To order, visit [hbr.org](http://hbr.org).



# Easy on the Eyes

**A design legend tells how to turn complex “real world” information into clear visual messages**

by Kirsten D. Sandberg

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**Graphic designer Nigel Holmes** has been one of the gurus of the “thinking visually” movement, using charts, graphs, and pictures to make complex data more accessible. Along with writing three industry primers on the topic, Holmes has worked at a number of publications, including 16 years as the graphics director for *Time* magazine. He now directs his own design firm, Explanation Graphics, and has lectured on graphic design at the Stanford Professional Publishing Course for more than 20 years.

Contributing editor Kirsten D. Sandberg caught up with Holmes in his Westport, Conn., offices.

**Your peers have credited you with pioneering a whole new design genre called “explanation graphics.” What does that mean?**

It’s literal: graphics (drawings or animations that are generally two-dimensional) that explain information quickly and clearly. I use the term “explanation graphics” because I believe that “information graphics” is an overused, as well as inadequate and imprecise, name for what I do. Today, many graphics explain nothing. They just present data, and the reader is expected to work out their meanings. Charts that don’t explain themselves are worse than no charts. “Information must inform” has become a cliché, but it’s right.

**How do you go about creating an “explanation graphic”?**

I start by thinking, How can I keep the result simple? However, “simple” is a difficult word, because there is a fine balance between “simplifying” and “dumbing down.” Nevertheless, I remind myself

that most graphics appear in situations where the reader, viewer, or audience can take only so much at one time, especially during live presentations.

Remember that we move around in a full-color world with images passing by us all the time. But charts are not pictures of the real world; they depict abstract ideas, numbers, and concepts. We don't change the color of the type to blue when we describe the sky. It's the idea that counts.

And so I often start by imagining that I can use only black and white. I introduce color only when the information requires it to clarify a point or to focus the reader's eye on the point. Charts distinguish themselves best when they don't imitate the rush of images around them. They should be simpler than their surroundings.

#### **Then how can we use graphics software programs more effectively?**

PowerPoint is a good program, but people misuse it appallingly every day. Words shouldn't rush in from the side and screech to a halt just because a clever programmer wrote some code to make that possible. Besides, people start critiquing the form and not seeing the content. "Did you see what he did with the latest version of PowerPoint? It's got these cool effects!"

So try making your presentation not look like PowerPoint. Don't rely on the program's defaults—formulas always end up looking like formulas. Start with a blank slide every time, and paste—if you must—the vital parts that are common to all your slides. Spend much less time with the animation, those fades and wipes from one slide to another, and concentrate on your key points.

#### **Are charts culturally universal, or must we translate them in some way?**

Most of us are the same, whether in Africa, Japan, India, or New York. We can concentrate for a while, then the mind wanders, especially after lunch. Simple messages, straightforwardly presented without jargon and with some humor, are better than earnest, data-stuffed boxes with tiny graphics that look important but in fact glaze your eyes over.

#### **What should we remember when using graphics in live presentations versus in print?**

The human voice is more powerful than the written word. Don't tax audiences with the job of listening to and looking at the same words (which are never in sync with each other). It's a lazy way to shape a presentation. Words and pictures should complement rather than duplicate each other, delivering information through both the ear and the eye. What you're saying shouldn't appear on the screen while you're saying it. I mix methods, sometimes just talking, at other times just words on the screen and silence. Sometimes pictures and spoken words, sometimes audience participation.

#### **If you have to prepare a series of graphics for someone else to use in a report or presentation, then how do you make sure that you're creating the right illustrations—before you get started?**

Making slides for presentations is considered one of those necessary but thankless tasks. I'm sorry that too few people find charts and diagrams worth doing. That's why PowerPoint resides on the computers of administrative assistants and not on those of the people actually delivering the material.

So, to make the process as painless as possible, start with a pencil, paper, and the guidelines for using the right type of chart (see box). A little impromptu sketching—and you needn't be able to "draw"—in front of the person requesting the presentation will quickly nail down the best way to show the information. If you can't overcome the "I have no time to discuss it" attitude, then make rough pencil sketches of what was requested, as well as sketches of alternatives, and show these first before you ever touch the computer. You'll be amazed by how much time this method saves in the end, and how many questions it raises about design and content that were invisible in the raw data.

#### **How can we test our charts for effectiveness?**

Rehearse them. Run through the charts many times over in front of a receptive audience, even of one. Ask, "Did you get the point? Did you get enough information? Did I rush to the next point too quickly? Did I make too many points?" Show the graphic to others and see whether they can "read" it properly and understand its point.

Managers should allow themselves and others more time to prepare, and the presenters should always participate in making every part of the presentation, deciding which parts to speak and which to project onto a screen. For printed publications, the designer must work with editorial to decide which part of a graphic is written and which is drawn.

**How can we use graphics for emotional impact?**

By being human, above all. But also by knowing thoroughly what your subject is, and by making it accessible (not talking down, of course) to other humans just like you. By allowing people to laugh. By involving their imaginations. By referring to things outside the direct subject being discussed. By drawing comparisons. By enjoying what you do. It shows.

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This article originally appeared in *Harvard Management Communication Letter* (product #CO208C). To order, visit [hbr.org](http://hbr.org).

## To get your audience to really see what you mean, pick the right strategy.

**Do** use fever charts (also called line charts) to track the progress of a quantity, like price or inventory, *over a period of time*. They are especially good for showing trends—what happened in the past and what might happen in the future. As a general rule, dates appear along the bottom and quantities go up the side. A thick line represents the movement of the quantity from left to right over time and up or down according to the scale, such as dollars or units.

**Do** use bar charts to show the relationships among different items *at one time*. Unlike fever charts, bars work best when the time element is static, as in a comparison of the current prices of eight computers from different manufacturers.

In pie charts, **do** try to *use numbers that add up to 100%*. If that is not possible, make sure to insert a note about it on the chart, because some readers delight in pointing out “mistakes.”

A table isn’t a visualization of numbers—it *is* the numbers. **Do** consider *using a table* when numbers differ by orders of magnitude so that no scale suffices in plotting them. Take this set of numbers: 20, 400, 160,000, and 5,600,000,000. A chart will lose the detail of low figures if it tries to reach the high ones without breaking the scale. If you must break the scale, then just use a table, because a chart with a broken scale is no longer a true picture of the numbers.

If numbers are so big that any graphic representation fails to capture them, **do** use *word pictures* to put them in a human context. Think of a trillion dollars

of national debt. How much bigger is a trillion than a billion? Three zeros, or one thousand times. Or consider this option: it’s the year 0 A.D., and you have a trillion dollars to spend at the rate of a million dollars a day. By the year 3 A.D., you’ve spent a billion. By the year 2002, you’d still have 736 years to go, spending a million every day, before you reached the end of your trillion-dollar pile. We can picture that in our minds because we know the lengths of a day, a year, and a millennium, and we can imagine spending a million dollars.

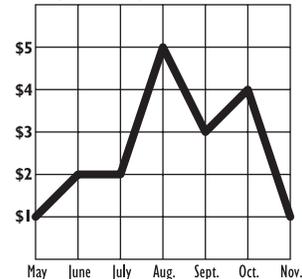
Once you’ve settled on your approach, be careful not to undercut your efforts with gimmicks.

**Don’t** use the third dimension or *animation for animation’s sake*. A chart shouldn’t move around or jump off the page or screen—it should stay there and let the audience read it. Work in two dimensions.

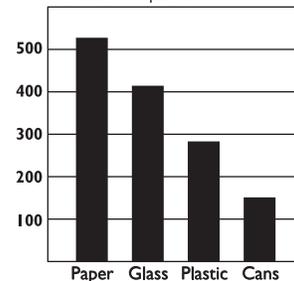
**Don’t** use a busy background to signify the subject of the chart. No cloud formations to suggest “sky.” Most photographic or brightly colored backdrops interfere with visibility. *Plain backgrounds* allow the reader to read the information easily. Use white, black, or a pale color.

**Don’t** use lots of color to tie-dye a chart. Too many hues confuse the meaning. Think of color as information itself, never as decoration to a finished chart. Start with black and white. *Add color only when you need it to clarify something*, like distinguishing two thick lines in a fever chart. If someone else has created PowerPoint slides for you, then use the computer to remove all unnecessary colors.

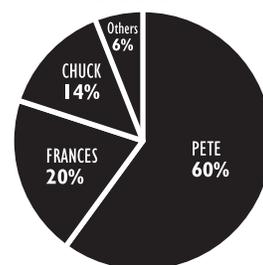
**UP AND DOWN**  
the price of widgets



**DAILY TRASH, 2002**  
in thousands of pounds



**WHO GETS WHAT**



**Don’t** use ornate, flowery fonts. *Use one simple sans serif font* in a variety of weights and sizes. Keep the final size of the chart in mind when choosing type size. You might enlarge it to go into a store window, on a banner, or on an auditorium wall. You might reduce it to appear in a printed report, where space is at a premium. The final size matters, not what you see on your desktop.

Images courtesy of Nigel Holmes

# Plan for Visuals

**Good visual aids will give your presentation impact, keep the audience engaged, and make your points stick.**

**As you organize your presentation,** identify opportunities to use visuals to get your points across and make them stick in the minds of listeners. Everyone has a preferred learning style, but most people respond better to visuals than to the spoken word alone. Consider the following research findings:

- People gain 75 percent of what they know visually, 13 percent through hearing, and 12 percent through smell.
- A picture is three times as effective in conveying information as words alone.
- Words and pictures together are *six times as effective* as words alone.

Use visual aids to help your audience maintain attention and remember facts. Use them also to help people understand ideas, relationships, or physical layouts. Visuals can also be used as cues that you are moving to a new topic.

Remember, however, that when the audience is looking at a visual, it is not looking at you, so keep visuals to a minimum. And do not use word-heavy slides to act as an outline; instead, know your speech thoroughly.

## **Choose the appropriate media**

You have many choices for your visuals, including computer-based slides, flip charts, and handouts. When selecting from among these media, you need to consider flexibility, cost, and appropriateness for your presentation.

## MEDIA PROS AND CONS

Medium	Pros	Cons
Computer-based slides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Easy to create, update, transport</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Do not always project clearly</li> <li>▪ Technology can break down, so you need to have a backup set of overhead slides</li> </ul>
Flip charts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Flexible</li> <li>▪ Easy to create</li> <li>▪ Encourage interaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Not effective for large groups</li> <li>▪ Difficult to transport</li> </ul>
Handouts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Useful for informal, short presentations</li> <li>▪ Provide a place for note-taking and a takeaway for later reference</li> <li>▪ Can contain supplemental background information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Can become the audience's focal point, distracting them from listening to you</li> </ul>

If you choose to use handouts, avoid distributing them during the presentation. It detracts from your presentation.

### Effective visuals

Not all visuals enhance a presentation. If you're like most white-collar workers, you're probably familiar with "death by PowerPoint"—presentations in which the speaker uses too many slides, uses visuals with confusing flow charts of boxes, arrows, feedback loops, and text, packs visuals border to border with text or images, or, worse, simply reads the text in the visuals.

To be effective, visuals should

- Be simple
- Use graphics, icons, and symbols to reinforce or communicate a concept
- Use key words, not full sentences
- Use only one concept and no more than six lines per slide or page
- Use only three to six ideas on each flip chart sheet
- Use color, where possible, but not excessively
- Use pictures where possible
- Use bullets, not numbers, for nonsequential items
- Use all-uppercase letters only for titles or acronyms

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## TIPS FOR CREATING VISUALS

- ✓ Use a single idea with no more than six lines per slide.
  - ✓ Be selective with your words.
  - ✓ Don't use vertical lettering.
  - ✓ Use a maximum of two sizes of type per page.
  - ✓ Use uppercase and lowercase letters. Use all-uppercase only for titles or acronyms.
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This article originally appeared in *Giving Presentations* from the Pocket Mentor series from Harvard Business Press (product #14785). To order, visit [hbr.org](http://hbr.org).



# Why the Best Presentations Are Good Conversations

**You don't like to be talked at, and neither does your audience. So engage listeners in a dialogue. Here's how.**

by Roly Grimshaw

*Roly Grimshaw is the director of The Kingstree Group, a London-based communications consultancy. He can be reached at [hmcl@hbsp.harvard.edu](mailto:hmcl@hbsp.harvard.edu).*

**A partner in a private equity firm** was recently lamenting the irritating parade of applicants who made a pitch for an auditing contract with his firm. During the first presentation, he complained, the auditor droned on and on, piling on information the partner already knew or found irrelevant. During the second presentation, the team making a pitch showed up with entertaining slides and videos, but the show felt artificial and false—not qualities desired in an auditor.

So what was so special about the presentation from the firm he finally hired? Their pitch, he said, felt like it was made by honest, competent professionals who “we just got talking to.” They did not make a presentation, he said, but rather focused the conversation on the firm’s business issues and how their team could offer support.

In the end, the partner said he believed he could trust this team and felt as though he had already hired the firm. So he did.

Such “conversations” aren’t accidental. When we talked to the team representing the winning auditing firm—a Kingstree client—they said they *had* made a presentation. But unlike their competitors, these auditors presented information in their own conversational style and got their listeners talking about their most important needs, which then allowed the presentation to zero in on those issues.

In our work and research at Kingstree, we've found this kind of dialogue is key to engaging listeners, conveying credibility, and inspiring trust during a presentation—whether it's to a large group or a small meeting. This approach to presentations builds on the speaker's unique conversational style, a style as unique as his thumbprint. But it also builds on certain characteristics of conversation that are common to all of us, providing a framework that can enhance the impact of presentations.

### **Traditional approaches**

Unfortunately, traditional advice and coaching for presenters often fails in this critical area. For instance, speakers sometimes take the role-model approach and think they should emulate the great communicators. “Ronald Reagan was a great communicator, Winston Churchill was a great communicator, and so to be a great communicator myself, I must be like them.” Unfortunately, this often leads a speaker to present an artificial self.

Another approach is to identify what a so-called good presenter looks like—this is the “do's and don'ts” approach. First someone is filmed making a presentation. Then she's coached to stand up straighter, wave her arms like this, move around like that, add intonation to her voice, and maintain maximum eye contact with the audience.

When the person is filmed again, the results look better: the performance is more disciplined, the presenter speaks with more animation and more variety.

But this approach also encourages artificiality. Imagine this scenario. A speaker arrives at the conference, meets the organizers—some of whom she knows already, others who are being introduced for the first time. Right from the word “go,” the speaker is creating an impression. As she chats to people she meets, they are forming an opinion of her personality. She involves them in the dialogue, makes points, asks questions, and relates anecdotes, all in her own unique style. Her gestures are not planned, her smiles not rigged, her intonation not imposed.

But then she stands on the platform and behaves differently, thus creating a new impression, a false, even plastic, one. This is jarring and weakens her credibility with the very people she'd earlier made such a good impression on.

### **A better way**

There is another way. In contrast, what if the speaker's style behind the podium were exactly the same as when she was having a conversation, modified according to the size of the audience and what she has to say? Then the audience members would see the same genuine characteristics and would feel that they were listening to the same person, behaving naturally. In other words, what if the person's presentation style were completely consistent with her natural one-on-one communication style?

This consistency is what made Reagan such an effective communicator: his communication style was the same talking to his wife as it was giving the State of the Union address.

### **The dynamics of conversation**

So how does one begin to set up the dialogue with the audience? The trick is to identify what makes conversation work and put that into action in a presentation.

It starts with structure. Build your presentation around key points, with evidence to support them. In conversation, we tend to make a point and then prove it. You might say to someone in a bar: “I think the Olympics should always be held in the same place. It would be easier, cheaper, and safer.” You make the point and then back it up. You are unlikely to say “I'd like to spend a few minutes reviewing the options for the Olympics...” And yet so many presentations are built that way, on the Cartesian approach of evidence leading to a conclusion, so effective with the written word—but not with the spoken.

Make sure the evidence you use to prove key points is mentally stimulating. A good example or an anecdote will create a far better mental picture than nonstop facts. A graphic slide will stimulate thinking—the mental dialogue—more effectively than a text slide.

So build around key points. Start with a strong, captivating statement, and reinforce the key points with some stimulating evidence. The audience will be thinking about what you say, and the mental dialogue will be under way.

### **Dialogue in action**

What about the delivery itself? How do we establish a dialogue when we are presenting to

several people? We cannot expect a response from everyone in the audience—and we couldn't cope with such a response if we had it. And, if we stopped for questions after every idea, we would never get our message across!

But if we put back into our own delivery what we do naturally in conversation, the audience will feel just as involved as in a one-on-one conversation. One way of getting the mental dialogue going is to pause after an idea—the “Did you get that?” pause. Why? Such a pause forces mental dialogue. Audience members find themselves thinking about what is being said.

Conversation, when it's working, is a receiver-driven affair. When we're speaking, we don't stare at the other person. We tend to look all over the place as we speak and come back to the listener—the receiver—to get acknowledgment.

That “Did you get that?” pause with eye contact elicits a response, usually a nod, a grunt or some other signal that is telling us that the idea is logged and we can carry on. So the listener is driving the pace. If we get a quizzical or a bored-looking response, we react accordingly, using stock phrases or figures of speech such as “Are you with me?” or “Do you see what I mean?”

The listener is intimately involved in the communication and is forced to think about what we are saying. That signal to carry on may be replaced by a comment or opinion and so the mental and physical dialogue gathers pace.

Add an example or anecdote, and your audience will be making mental pictures, relating what is being said to their own experience.

Comedians are masters at the creation of mental dialogue. A joke read in a joke book is so often dull and, until one reaches the punchline, rather pointless. But if well performed, the same joke delivered by a skilled comedian will have us falling about with laughter after a few words!

A good comedian's delivery forces us to draw mental pictures and to relate what he is saying to our own experience and sense of humor, so that we are all laughing, even if we all have different pictures in our minds.

Rhetorical questions are another great tactic to use. Here's an experiment. Try not to think about this question: “This article is quite interesting so far, isn't it?” Didn't you find it difficult not to respond? And didn't you find it difficult not to respond to *that* question, too? Even if I might not like your answers, I have engaged you in a dialogue.

### Judging success

Of course, in a presentation, questions aren't asked solely by the speaker; they're asked by audience members in the Q&A. At Kingstree, we measure the success of our clients' presentations not so much by what they look like—we make sure our clients use their own unique style—but by these questions.

If a presenter has sparked a dialogue in the minds of his listeners, the questions that follow his presentation will home in on its key details. On the other hand, if audience members did not engage in a mental conversation with the speaker, their questions likely will be perfunctory and related only generally to the presentation's points.

So the next time you deliver a presentation, welcome it if you hear your key points qualified, critiqued, even challenged. After all, it's proof that your listeners have been so engaged by your presentation that they want the conversation to continue.

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This article originally appeared in *Harvard Management Communication Letter* (product #C0410C). To order, visit [hbr.org](http://hbr.org).



# Connect with Your Audience

**The key is using your physical presence to create trust.**

by Nick Morgan

*Nick Morgan is President of Public Words Inc, a communications consulting firm, and author of Trust Me: Four Steps to Authenticity and Charisma.*

**“What moves an audience** to action? Fair words or fair face?” Audiences are moved to action by speakers they trust. Once a speech is fully launched, a successful presenter can feel the audience deciding to trust her. The audience simultaneously relaxes—because it knows it is not wasting its time—and pays attention—because it is confirmed in its original decision to attend the speech. A kinesthetic bond develops between the audience and the speaker. It is this kinesthetic moment that fundamentally determines the success or failure of a presentation.

Kinesthetics is the awareness of where you are in space in relation to other people. It is the single most important skill to master as a presenter.

Why should this be so? Think of the issue from the audience’s point of view. It is simply smart, not cynical, to try to judge underlying motivations before deciding to trust a presenter. At this level, emotions do become paramount. Audiences should try to read the nonverbal communications of speakers precisely because it is here that issues of trust are best decided. Most people are not great liars (or actors). Speakers are no exception. Under the influence of adrenaline, most presenters resort to instinctive gestures conveying nonverbal communication learned over a lifetime. It is at this level that audiences take the measure of their speakers—and it is right that they should do so. It’s not terribly easy to work up a slick sales pitch, but it is even harder to create a great presentation out of mediocre material that you don’t believe.

Audiences understand this, and so they take the measure of the presenter at a mostly unconscious level, deciding whether or not to trust her (and buy the message) based on the speaker's ability to connect with the audience in a way that appears sincere, straightforward, and open.

Following are some tips to ensure that your kinesthetic performance doesn't get in the way of connecting with your audience—and in fact creates an opportunity for a true kinesthetic bond to develop between you and them.

**1. Get over your nervousness—fast.** Most speakers spend the first few minutes of a presentation working out the worst of their nerves. It's something that audiences expect, and they're willing to cut the presenter some slack at the opening. An audience expects a speaker to warm to her task, however, and to begin to relax a few minutes into the speech. If the speaker remains nervous, the audience will begin to find that nervousness a barrier to comprehension of the rest of the speech, and to trust. Unfortunately, that means that a speaker only has at most the first five minutes of a speech to get over her stage fright. After that, nervousness becomes a distinct liability.

The reason is that the audience is eager to decide whether or not to trust a presenter, and so it interprets the speaker's behavior as meaningful *to the audience*, even if the speaker is merely struggling with nerves.

So it's up to you to figure out how to reach a plateau of relative comfort quickly. For some, mental imagining—to counteract the doom scenarios we all play out in our heads—seems to help. For others, breathing and self-directed pep talks are efficacious. For all of us, preparation and practice are essential. If you're tempted to wing it—don't. It may work some of the time, but it won't always be enough, and there is no feeling worse than that of losing an audience halfway through a talk because you suddenly realize you don't really know what you're talking about.

**2. It's not what you do, it's what they see.** Audiences interpret behavior as meaningful to them. So, for example, if you're feeling cold in front of an audience because the air conditioning in the room is turned down too far, resist the temptation to cross your arms. Audiences will probably take this gesture to mean that you're feeling defensive, even if they're cold themselves.

Spend some time thinking through the ways in which your audience is likely to interpret your standard repertoire of gestures. If you don't know what they are, get a close friend to tell you—or arrange to have yourself videotaped. Many people back away from an audience, for example, if emotions threaten to become heated. Someone will ask a strongly worded question, say, and the speaker will retreat to the safety of the podium. Audiences will almost always interpret this gesture as a sign of unwillingness to engage in the important issues, or even as simple fear. So, if questioners turn up the heat on you, don't back down. Get in their personal space, maintain your cool, and answer the question.

**3. Above all, remember the audience's need to connect with you.** The easiest way to get a reading on what another person is really thinking—indeed the only way we're truly comfortable with—is when that person is having a one-on-one conversation with us. As a speaker, you need to respect that need in each individual member of your audience. But how can you manage this feat when you're talking to a hundred people—or a thousand?

You can't, literally. But you can do the next best thing. You can connect personally with a few members of the audience by moving in close to them—between four feet and two feet away—and allowing those members of the audience to stand in proxy to the whole. Audiences are willing to accept this second-best solution. What they are not willing to accept is the sincerity of someone who begins a speech behind the podium and never leaves it to try to move closer to them. If you are one of those speakers who can't bear to leave the safety of the space behind the podium, either get over your fears or leave the speaking to someone else. In today's casual rhetorical atmosphere, traditional podium speaking is simply no longer adequate.

Now, it's not enough just to move randomly toward various audience members as you're talking through your slides. Because you raise the energy in the room and focus attention on yourself when you move in close to an audience member, you need to pick the right moment. If you're not saying something important then, your kinesthetic message and your content will be at odds. This sets up a battle between your listeners' conscious deciphering of the content and their largely unconscious reading of your motivations. Your listeners will begin to wonder

what's really important—they may simply interpret what you say while you're standing close to them as the main points. If those aren't the main points, you'll confuse your listeners.

Remember the TV show *Columbo*? The rumpled detective would wear down his suspect (almost always the guilty party) by working his way through a long list of mumbled and often irrelevant questions. Finally, he would start to move away, and the guilty party would breathe a sigh of relief and begin to relax. Then Columbo would turn back and say something like, "One more thing. What was the color of the tie you were wearing that day?" Columbo was signaling that his question was less important than it really was by his kinesthetic distance from the criminal. The result was that the criminal was more likely to tell him the truth in an unguarded moment.

There, the kinesthetic message and the content are deliberately at variance because Columbo wants to trick the truth out of the guilty party. Speakers need to use the same wisdom about

kinesthetic messages but in a more positive way. Rather than tricking your audience, make your content and your actions cohere by moving toward your listeners at key moments and away from them when you want to signal a pause or change of topic.

Good kinesthetic speaking means making your content and your delivery consistent with one another. Far too many business speakers lurk behind podiums or wander around the public space in front of an audience, wondering why they can't seem to connect with their listeners. The answer has been available for 2,500 years, as long as people have been presenting—and struggling to do it more successfully.

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This article originally appeared in *Harvard Management Communication Letter* (product #C0108B). To order, visit [hbr.org](http://hbr.org).



# Presence: How to Get It, How to Use It

**The Ariel Group uses acting exercises to make us all into star performers.**

**Why do some people** instantly command attention and respect? When they speak, we listen. Their opinions seem to carry more weight. They inspire trust in those around them. These people have “presence”—and the Ariel Group believes that we’re all capable of developing it.

Based in Cambridge, Mass., the Ariel Group is a consulting company of professional actors and singers that works with executives worldwide to help them become more powerful communicators and leaders. According to Belle Linda Halpern and Kathy Lubar, founders of the Ariel Group, presence can be learned. The key is finding and enhancing your own, authentic style of communication—rather than trying to be someone you’re not. The company’s approach involves using theaterbased exercises. But wait, you say. Isn’t acting about pretending to be someone else? A paradox? Writer Martha Craumer recently interviewed Lubar and Halpern to get their “take” on presence, acting, and communicating with integrity.

**What is presence? How do you define that certain, intangible something that some people seem to have?**

**LUBAR:** Presence comes from knowing who you are—and being comfortable with that. Everyone has a unique presence, a natural communication style. We work with people to find out what that is, and to expand on it. For one person, presence might come in the form of stillness, which becomes a strength that works well for them. Someone else might be high-energy, dynamic, and movement-driven. The key is being real, being authentic.

**HALPERN:** People with presence know how to connect with others, no matter how large the audience

## Learning to be yourself: how to develop presence

You may think that presence is inborn—you either have it or you don't. Not true, says the Ariel Group. Presence can be developed. Here's how:

**Discover your natural communication style.** Everyone has a highly individual style of communicating. Finding that style—and being true to it—leads to authentic presence. The dynamo who electrifies the room with his energy and booming voice may indeed have presence. But for someone else, presence may come from a quiet confidence and a few carefully chosen words. The key is finding and enhancing your own style—not trying to be someone else.

**Be present.** It's hard to have presence if you're thinking about your next meeting or your golf game. Instead, focus intently on the person or people you're with. The worst insult you can give an actor is that he just "telephoned in" his performance, implying that he wasn't really there. Actors work all the time on being 100% present, no matter how many times they've said the same line in the same scene. They find a way to be in the moment, to really listen to how their partner's line was delivered and to let it truly affect them. Businesspeople need the same focus in their presentations and in their dealings with clients and colleagues.

**Use all your expressive capabilities.** Studies show that the nonverbal aspects of your message—your voice, body language, and so forth—account for more than 90% of how your message comes across. The verbal content counts for less than 10%. But businesspeople tend to focus almost exclusively on the verbal aspects of communication—the content. They give little thought to how they'll use their voice, engage their audience, or use their body or the physical space around them. You can increase your presence by using more of your expressive capabilities—your voice, body, face, eyes, spirit, and full emotional range. Being congruent—using these capabilities in support of your message—increases the power of your message.

**Connect with your audience.** A critical part of presence is the ability to connect with people—both individuals and groups. To make your message come alive, use stories, metaphors, and imagery when you speak. These resonate more powerfully with people than just facts and figures. And change the way you listen. When someone else is speaking, listen not just for content, but for that person's values, strengths, and unspoken concerns. Finally, erase the negative, self-critical tapes that get in the way of your ability to connect with people. You can't focus on others if you're busy judging yourself and your performance.

is—whether it's one person or a thousand. And they have a sense of congruence about them—their voice, body, emotions, words, and energy all work together.

### Why is presence useful in the business world?

LUBAR: Presence helps you build trust and credibility quickly. It helps you truly connect with people. It communicates integrity. All of

these things help you to develop strong, long-term relationships with clients and colleagues—relationships that are critical to business success. For anyone who interacts with clients or is responsible for developing business, anyone who wants to inspire, lead, or motivate others, anyone who has to manage a tough situation or communicate difficult truths, presence can have a major impact.

HALPERN: We work with a number of consulting firms. The younger consultants often have to develop relationships with CEOs who are 25 years their senior. The way to do this is not by coming across as "I'm an expert and I know more than you." They have to find out what they can offer to the world beside their smarts. So we work with them to understand what they stand for and what experiences have shaped their values. Then they have the presence to hold their own with senior executives. But knowing who you are and what you stand for helps to give you presence and credibility in any situation.

### Interesting approach. You start with the core person and build on that, as opposed to working on external gestures and so forth, like many traditional speech coaches.

LUBAR: That's something we feel very strongly about. Instead of trying to get people to be something they're not, we help them to become more comfortable with who they really are. When people are in touch with their feelings and express themselves honestly, their messages come across more powerfully.

We're always looking for the key that will unlock a person's potential as a powerful communicator. And we look to the theater for ways to tap into that potential.

### Why the theater?

HALPERN: Adult learning is a challenge because the more you know, and the more analytical you become, the more likely you are to judge. By taking people out of the business world and exposing them to theater exercises, we give the beginner's mind a chance to emerge, and people become sponges. They're willing to take chances and make mistakes—and that allows for breakthrough learning. Non-actors are so free and joyous and liberated when they get it.

LUBAR: The idea that presence can be learned is revolutionary for people. But presence can be developed. It can be broken down into very

specific elements. Actors work on their presence all the time. And they work hard at making it look relaxed and natural.

### How do you reconcile “authenticity” with acting and theater skills? Aren’t they mutually exclusive?

HALPERN: We all have different sides to our personalities, and we take on different roles in different settings—including business settings. But just because the roles are different doesn’t mean they aren’t authentic aspects of who we are. Knowing who you are and what you stand for and what’s important to you helps you to be authentic all the time.

LUBAR: Most of us have a hard time staying authentic and true to ourselves in high-pressure situations. It seems counterintuitive, but theater exercises can help you stay in touch with—not mask—your real self. When we’re under pressure to perform, or trying to manage a difficult situation, we often end up coming across in ways we never intended—our authentic selves seem to run for cover. And when our body language contradicts our message, we lose credibility and trust, and come across as dishonest or phony.

### Any examples come to mind?

HALPERN: I remember a video that Frank Borman sent to employees when he was the head of Eastern Airlines. He was talking about the company’s financial troubles and asking people to take a salary cut, but he had a smile on his face. And he was leaning against his desk in a huge office. Very incongruous—and very ineffective.

LUBAR: And the interesting thing is, he’s supposed to be a great guy—very nice, very caring. But he came across as sneering and insincere, probably because of nerves. He didn’t come across as himself because he lacked the skills and self-awareness to get his message across. So coaching and theater exercises can actually help you to be more authentic. It is paradoxical.

### What types of theater exercises do you use?

HALPERN: We use a lot of storytelling and improvisational exercises. We often work with dramatic monologues and encourage people to fully take on another character. For example, if a CEO needs to motivate his or her people,

## Instant presence: exercises to get you there quickly

Have you ever found yourself at the front of a room about to speak to a group of restless-looking businesspeople? Have you wished there was something you could do to give yourself a quick boost in personal magnetism? Here HMCL offers a few quick tips based on practical experience.

**Take a deep breath and let it out slowly.** Breathing will calm you and steady your nerves. The increased confidence will show in your face and physique.

**Pause to look at the audience.** Most people believe that they have to start speaking immediately. But silences are powerful. Use them.

**Keep your upper body still.** When the adrenaline hits, most people relieve the stress by moving too much. And it’s typically aimless motion. Instead, let the energy come out in your voice, and in powerful but simple hand gestures.

**Pick a few members of the audience to look at.** Most people look rapidly around the room, but it is more effective to make eye contact with a representative sample of the audience. Hold the gaze for as much as five or six seconds.

**Nod at them.** Nodding builds agreement. And you’ll find people nodding back. Those are folks who are on your side. As the speech goes on, focus on them. Don’t ignore the rest of the audience, but favor the ones who nod back at you.

we might pick the monologue from Henry V where he rouses the troops. Or if someone is uncomfortable using physical space, we might assign a monologue that involves playing a drunk and falling down. That creates a sense of physical freedom that can actually shift the way you move about the room in a business presentation. We always come back and apply the exercise to a business situation.

LUBAR: We worked with one executive who was completely buttoned up. No facial expression, no physical energy—just dead, and it was really blocking his progress at work. The first evening of the workshop we ended later than planned. During the break, he called home to say goodnight to his little daughters, ages six and eight, and he became a completely different person. His face and voice came to life. But after the break he reverted to his other self. So we asked him to do the next exercise as if he were addressing a group of six- and eight-year-olds at a birthday party. And it was like night and day. We encouraged him to go further with it, to exaggerate and have fun with it, and we stopped him a few times to ask if it was believable. Then

we worked on how to integrate that energy. By the end of the program, every time he spoke—whether one-on-one, in a group situation, or a presentation—he began integrating these two sides of his personality into one. It was transformational.

HALPERN: In the process of working through these exercises, people often realize that their presence—who they are—is far bigger than they thought. And it expands their sense of self and their comfort with taking up more space.

**It sounds like you have people doing things they haven't done for years—maybe since they were kids. It must be enormously liberating.**

LUBAR: As children we tend to be much more expansive. But over time we get a lot of cultural and corporate messages that say we have to keep a lid on it and be serious. We give people permission to open the lid and use more of

their expressive selves. This gives them a wonderful sense of freedom and power—and it can be very exhilarating. I think that's why they often feel such a sense of joy coming out of the workshops. They've released something in themselves. Then the question becomes how to get comfortable with that and how much to bring into a business situation. And it's usually far more than they initially thought.

HALPERN: One manager we worked with early on said something that really inspired us. He said that before he took our workshop, he felt that expressing himself fully was an act of self-indulgence. After the workshop, he realized that expressing himself fully was an act of generosity. That has always stayed with us.

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This article originally appeared in *Harvard Management Communication Letter* (product #C9905C). To order, visit [hbr.org](http://hbr.org).

# Are Your Presentations Inspiring?

One of the great speeches of history offers some surprising lessons

**Has one of your speeches** ever caused your listeners to riot in the streets for three days? That was the result of President John F. Kennedy's June 26, 1963 address to the citizens of West Berlin. More than a million people lined the Rudolf Wilde Platz in the divided city to hear the young American president who had been so severely tested on his resistance to Communism by the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Berlin Wall itself. It may well have been the largest gathering of its kind in human history. The West Berliners' need for reassurance was great; they felt isolated by the newly-built wall.

Within a few minutes, speaking through an interpreter, Kennedy created a delirium of enthusiasm in his listeners, prompting them to demonstrate for three days until the police and military were able to reestablish control.

What was the secret of Kennedy's power? How did he connect so strongly with his audience? What are the lessons of this short, simple, and yet extraordinary speech? Can they be applied to the typical business presentation?

Looking at Kennedy's speech in some detail yields six lessons that can help make your presentations, if not riot inducing, at least more memorable than the average business talk.

**1. Write it yourself.** Kennedy wrote the short speech himself and insisted on delivering it over the objections of the military command. The generals worried that the speech would cause the nervous citizens of Berlin to riot—as, in fact, they did. But the point is that Kennedy avoided the bureaucratic and lengthy in his talk partly because he didn't have the time to create anything wordier. He wrote the

speech in haste over the few days prior to the event, on his way to Berlin. Lacking the usual governmental resources to help him, he was forced to keep it simple.

The speech also reflected his beliefs more closely than a speech penned by his speechwriters ever could have. And that's the first lesson for business speakers. Rather than having your staff prepare some notes for what they think you should say, take the time to figure out the main points for yourself. Then get your researchers to fill in any missing detail. That way the presentation is more likely to reflect your beliefs and thinking.

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**Many presentations are long-winded and simpleminded; few manage to say the right thing at the right time in the fewest possible words.**

**2. Keep it simple and true.** This speech belongs to a select group of memorable speeches that clock in at 10 minutes or less and stick to one clear theme. It is the coincidence of integrity, brevity, and simplicity with an important occasion that makes for golden rhetoric. Many presentations are long-winded and simpleminded; few manage to say the right thing at the right time in the fewest possible words. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech, and even the Sermon on the Mount all combine these ingredients unforgettably. Reagan's eulogy on the subject of the Challenger disaster comes close; time will be the judge of that speech's staying power. In each case, the absolute clarity and conviction of the speaker came first. Then came the simplicity of delivery. Finally, the success of the speech in the moment ensured that history would remember it forever.

In Kennedy's case, the speech is about freedom and the unity of all free peoples, including the citizens of Berlin. The enemy of freedom is Communism, says Kennedy, but it cannot prevail against free peoples everywhere. That's it. "Freedom has many difficulties, and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put up a wall to keep our people in," says Kennedy. The words are unforgettable because they confront directly the hard reality facing Berliners. He doesn't try to palliate the ugly truth of the situation. He meets the seriousness of the political crisis with matching passion and strength.

**3. Meet the needs of the audience.** Perhaps most fundamentally, Kennedy understood the needs of the citizens of Berlin and addressed them. They had just been shut off from freedom by the Berlin Wall and were understandably feeling isolated and in danger of being

abandoned by the West. Would America stand by them?

Kennedy brilliantly addressed those concerns by talking about freedom being indivisible: "So let me ask you, as I close, to lift your eyes beyond the dangers of today, to the hopes of tomorrow, beyond the freedom merely of this city of Berlin, or your country of Germany, to the advance of freedom everywhere, beyond the wall to the day of peace with justice, beyond yourselves and ourselves to all mankind.

"Freedom is indivisible, and when one man is enslaved, all are not free. When all are free, then we can look forward to that day when this city will be joined as one and this country and this great continent of Europe in a peaceful and hopeful globe. When that day finally comes, as it will, the people of West Berlin can take sober satisfaction in the fact that they were in the front lines for almost two decades.

"All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words *Ich bin ein Berliner*."

By making common cause with them around the issue of freedom, Kennedy met the most deep-seated fears of the audience with reassurance. "Ich bin ein Berliner" was exactly what the city wanted to hear.

**4. But appeal to something larger than self-interest.** We humans are at once noble and selfish. If you appeal solely to our self-interest, we will listen, and perhaps appreciate your words. But we won't respect you. We know what pandering is, and we are quick to recognize it. The tendency to pander is what makes most political speeches today so forgettable. Kennedy understood that a principle was at stake, one that might be difficult and dangerous to uphold for the citizens of Berlin (and the free world) but one that was worth the fight. To really get your audience on its feet—and rioting—you have to show them how self-interest and larger principles coincide, such that personal sacrifice is worth it if it becomes necessary.

**5. Identify with your audience—early in the speech.** You can't preach to an audience about grand things, however, if the audience perceives you as aloof from them. It's another paradox that gives speakers trouble. You need to find the ways in which you and the audience are alike and make those clear early on. Your listeners will then be willing to open themselves to your

message. It's a way of building trust early on. Audiences want their speakers to have credibility, and they want to be able to trust them. You can't create the latter unless you find a way to connect with your audience.

Kennedy accomplishes his identification with the Berliners with the famous phrase, which he utters in the first minute of his speech: "Two thousand years ago the proudest boast was *Civis Romanus sum*. Today, in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is *Ich bin ein Berliner*." Of course, the president goes on to cement the identification with his brief sermon on freedom, but the initial move comes early, before the important themes of the talk have been established. Thus, Kennedy realizes that the first step he has to take is one toward his audience, in the essential figurative sense that shows that he understands their problems.

**6. Repeat a memorable phrase—or two—often.** Even in this short speech there is a good deal of repetition. It is the single most important linguistic device of speechmaking. Audiences have difficulty remembering what they hear—all the studies show that listeners retain only a small percentage of the presentations they witness—and repetition helps them keep up and gives them a sense of mastery of the occasion. So resist the temptation to try to be clever at your audience's expense. Instead, look for ways to repeat your basic message memorably. Kennedy uses the "Ich bin ein Berliner" line twice, at the beginning and at the end of the speech. He repeats another key phrase as well:

"There are many people in the world who really don't understand, or say they don't, what is the great issue between the free world and the Communist world. Let them come to Berlin.

## The Jelly Doughnut Speech?

It's impossible to discuss Kennedy's Berlin speech without at least a passing reference to the slight slipup that prompts some to call this speech the "jelly doughnut speech." In addition to describing a resident of Berlin, the German word "berliner" also refers to a type of German pastry. The translation of Kennedy's impassioned statement, "I take pride in the words *Ich bin ein Berliner*," can be literally taken to mean "I take pride in the words *I am a jelly doughnut*." (To say "I am a Berliner," Kennedy should have said, "*Ich bin Berliner*.") Fortunately for Kennedy, the tolerance for error is higher in public speech—it's a looser genre than, say, the written word. Accuracy is indeed important, but truthfulness and passion are more so.

There are some who say that Communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin. And there are some who say in Europe and elsewhere we can work with the Communists. Let them come to Berlin. And there are even a few who say that it is true that Communism is an evil system, but it permits us to make economic progress. *Lass' sie nach Berlin kommen*. Let them come to Berlin."

It's rare that the historical moment, the cause, and the speaker come together to produce unforgettable speechmaking, but when they do, the words can echo down the years to inspire us when the moment, the cause, and the speaker are gone. And we can take the lessons of the historical moment and apply them to our own speeches. Great rhetoric may be the result. Even if your listeners don't finally riot in the streets.

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This article originally appeared in *Harvard Management Communication Letter* (product #C0101A). To order, visit [hbr.org](http://hbr.org).



# The Twentieth Century's Greatest Speech—What Made It So Powerful?

## How Martin Luther King, Jr. won over the audience with his “I Have a Dream” oration

**Martin Luther King, Jr.** gave what is often called the greatest speech of the twentieth century on a sweltering day in August 1963, before a huge crowd spread across the Mall in Washington, D.C. What made the speech so great? A quick look at Reverend King's technique yields some insights that can improve your public presentations, too—even if your audience is less than half a million people and your venue less imposing than our nation's capital.

**1. King made it conversational.** Many people have heard of the “I Have a Dream” speech. But few know that the speech (and the audience) really came alive about half way through King's prepared text when, sensing that he was not reaching his audience as he wanted to, King actually began speaking extemporaneously. He put down the prepared speech, looked directly at the audience, and spoke from the heart. The result was electric. Studying the film of the speech shows that the audience began to respond shortly thereafter, shouting their approval of phrase after phrase, culminating in the unforgettable roar that greeted King's final lines: “*Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*”

**2. King made artful use of repetition.** Drawing upon his background as a Baptist preacher, King structured the ad-libbed portion of his speech by stating a new thought, and then elaborating on it. Next he would repeat the original phrase, and elaborate some more. The resulting repetition helped both the speaker and the audience keep track of where he was. The open-ended nature of this structure allowed King to work a phrase until he had exhausted it, and then move on, without confusing the audience. “*I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this*

*nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be selfevident; that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering {in} the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today."* Contrast this fluidity with the more formal opening of the speech, where King uses an extended metaphor—"a promissory note"—that is more compelling on paper than in presentation mode. *"When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir."*

**3. King used familiar language known to every American.** As King warmed to his task, he quoted Biblical phrases and national songs well-known to his listeners. Then he elaborated upon those references and made them relevant to his theme of working toward racial equality and harmony. By referring to well-known material, he brought his audience along with him, allowing them better to grasp his theme when he connected that to the familiar lore. *"This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning 'My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring: And if America is to become a great nation this must become true."*

**4. King let his audience know exactly where he stood.** The most frequently missed opportunity in business presentations today is the presenter telling the audience how she feels about the topic. What do you care about? Why? What is important to you about the topic? Audiences very much want to know the answers to those questions, because they help listeners know what's essential to take away from the talk. King left his audience in no doubt about his feelings. Charisma comes from passion about the topic, appropriately expressed, and King excelled here. *"This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able*

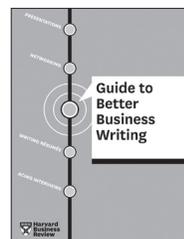
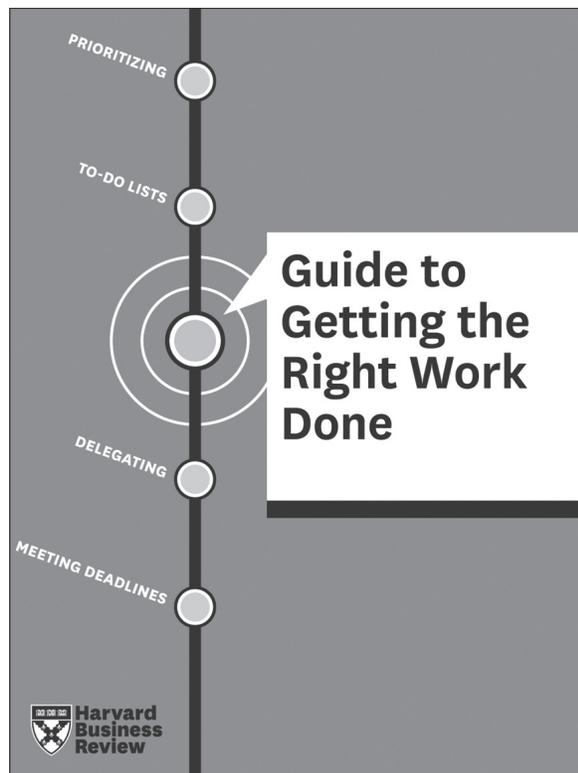
*to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."* It is said of the audience that was privileged to hear this great speech that even the FBI informants among the listeners were impressed with King's power and sincerity.

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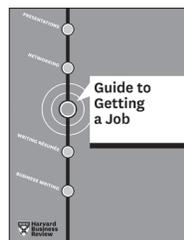
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