



What the Best Presenters Do Differently

By Carmine Gallo

According to Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, villagers would come from far and wide to hear Abraham Lincoln, then a prairie lawyer with a gift for storytelling. Lincoln didn't have the benefit of modern technology. He stood on a tree stump instead of a TED stage, and PowerPoint wouldn't be invented for another 130 years. And yet Lincoln "could simultaneously educate, entertain, and move his audiences," writes Goodwin.

While the tools of communication have changed since Lincoln regaled crowds with his storytelling techniques, the human brain has not. Our minds are wired for story. We think in narrative and enjoy consuming content in story form.

Understanding the difference between presenting and storytelling is critical to a leader's ability to engage an audience and move them to action. Unfortunately, presentation software often gets in the way. Slides should be designed to complement a story, not to replace the storyteller.

Following are five storytelling strategies to help you stand out the next time you give a presentation.

Presenters open PowerPoint. Storytellers craft a narrative.

If you want to engage your audience, you have to tell a story. But for most people who prepare presentations, storytelling is not top of mind.

Most “presenters” do what sounds logical: They begin by opening the slideware. But most presentation programs aren’t storytelling tools. They’re digital delivery mechanisms. PowerPoint’s default template asks for a title and text.

A bulleted list is not a story. A story is a connected series of events told through words and/or pictures. A story has a theme, attention-grabbing moments, heroes and villains, and a satisfying conclusion. Nicely designed slides cannot compensate for a poorly structured story.

Award-winning movie directors read or write the story before picking up a camera. They see the movie play out by sketching or drawing each scene on storyboards. In much the same way, effective presenters think through the elements of their content long before they open PowerPoint.

Before you sit down to create your slides, try this three-step process. First, write down your idea as if you were telling someone a story. Since you don’t naturally write or speak in bullet points, avoid them. Instead, use complete sentences with nouns, verbs, and transitions between paragraphs and ideas. Second, visualize each of your main concepts by “storyboarding”: sketching ideas on a whiteboard or a blank sheet of paper. Finally, gather the assets that will bring your story to life: videos, animations, graphics, or photos.

Presenters use text. Storytellers love pictures.

While serving as commander of the International Space Station, Chris Hadfield became a social media sensation by picking up a guitar and singing David Bowie’s “Space Oddity” while floating weightless. Back on Earth, his celebrated TED Talk has attracted more than 11 million views.

Hadfield's presentation, "What I learned from going blind in space," was an astonishing display of visual storytelling. His PowerPoint deck contained 35 slides — with no text. Instead, Hadfield relied on pictures, images, animations, and videos to introduce the audience to a world few will ever experience.

Researchers have found that your audience will recall about 10% of the content if they simply hear information. But the "picture superiority effect" means that if they hear information and see a picture, they'll retain 65%.

Florence Nightingale understood picture superiority more than a century before the invention of PowerPoint. Nightingale was a statistician and mathematician. She was also an empathetic nurse who was shocked to discover that more British soldiers were dying from unsanitary conditions in hospitals than were dying of battle wounds. When Nightingale sought funding from British authorities to improve conditions, she translated the dry data into a color-coded graphic. Nightingale knew that humans were moved more by stories and pictures than data and text alone.

If you want to engage an audience, build a presentation that favors pictures to complement the story you tell. A combination of images and words improves learning much more than words can do on their own.

Presenters dump data. Storytellers humanize it.

As Nightingale discovered, the human brain was not built to make sense of large numbers. Data is abstract until it's put into context that people can understand. And people can understand people.

I once met with a group of executives at a large medical equipment company preparing to launch a new brain-scanning machine at a prestigious conference. They

sent me hundreds of pages of clinical data to prove the technology could identify a patient's condition faster and more accurately than any existing device.

"Where are the people?" I asked.

While the data provided evidence for the efficacy of the technology, it didn't tell a story. Only humans could do that.

After a few hours of brainstorming with the executive team, we decided to put faces to the data. We built a presentation around two typical patients — David and Susan — who would benefit from the technology should they enter a hospital with symptoms of a possible stroke or heart attack.

At the same conference the following year, the executive who had delivered the presentation was walking down a hallway when a physician stopped him and said, "You're the David and Susan guy. Great presentation." The attendee hadn't remembered all the data, but the story left an impression.

The next time you have large datasets to present, add a face to the statistics.

Presenters are predictable. Storytellers surprise audiences.

Most PowerPoints are boring because they're predictable. We know what comes next — another slide of bullet points, followed by another, and another. A good story, however, has the element of surprise.

When Steve Jobs introduced the first iPod, he told the audience that the music player could store 1,000 songs. While other music players on the market could make the same

claim, Jobs explained that none of the competitors could fit in your pocket. And with the flair of a magician pulling a rabbit out of his hat, Jobs reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out the smallest MP3 player on the market. “One thousand songs in your pocket” became one of the most iconic taglines in product history.

Although many people considered Steve Jobs one of the most outstanding business presenters of our time, the Apple co-founder knew the real secret to winning over an audience: Create a presentation that complements a well-crafted story.

The human brain pays attention to novelty — twists and turns and unexpected events. Our brain perks up when we detect something that breaks a pattern.

There's no limit to your creativity. While you don't need to pull products out of your pocket to grab the audience's attention, do plan to surprise people with something they don't expect.

Presenters practice silently. Storytellers rehearse out loud.

Most business presentations are forgettable because speakers forget they're performing, not presenting. A great presentation informs, inspires, engages, and entertains. In other words, it's part performance and should be rehearsed like one.

Most business professionals flip through their slides silently to prepare for a presentation. Storytellers rehearse — out loud. They practice their vocal delivery, adding perfectly-timed pauses and varying the pace of their speech. If they plan to stand in front of a group, they'll stand during rehearsal. If they're going to be seated in a Zoom call, they'll take their seat in rehearsal and deliver each slide as though they're giving the real thing.

When you see yourself as a storyteller, the presentation your audience sees will change. Don't let presentation software get in the way of giving your audience information they'll pay attention to — and retain.

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