

10 Ingredients of a Knockout Presentation (Number 9 is Impossible)

by Dave Mac

This was a terrible idea.

Archie swallowed hard, took one step towards the stage, and froze.

300 sets of eyes peered at the stage. Awoken by the movement in the shadows behind the bright lights.

Archie Benedict looked down one last time at his notes.

How had his business partner, Jeff, considered, even for a split-second, that this was a good idea?

Archie had a strong aversion to speaking in public. So strong, he'd done everything in his power to make sure Jeff was fit and able to deliver this critical product development keynote.

Archie had made sure Jeff's secretary had booked him on an early flight back from New York, just in case there were delays. He'd called Jeff this morning to confirm he'd woken up in time to catch his flight.

Archie hadn't counted on maintenance staff striking and blockading the airports.

No more Jeff.

He'd barely looked at the presentation content. Wasting time making sure Jeff could get back to do it.

Archie thought about escaping. Scurrying away to the sanctuary of his quiet office.

He looked behind him, preparing to run. There was Jeff's secretary motioning for him to hurry and up and get out on stage.

Archie gulped. What a nightmare!

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and timidly walked on to the stage.

*

Have you ever felt like Archie?

Speaking in public is terrifying. Three quarters of us fear public speaking more than death.

It's possible to overcome your fear and do standout presentations. It's even possible for Archie to deliver a great presentation, despite having not prepared.

Here are the 10 ingredients of knockout presentations:

1. Treat your presentation like a conversation

Imagine you go out for a beer with friends.

Imagine one of your friends is speaking. He's talking word perfect. As if he's reading from a script.

As he talks you notice the pauses are unnatural or nonexistent. What he's saying sounds too rehearsed. The tone and associated body language just doesn't gel.

This is what most presenters sound like.

If your friend talked to you this way, it wouldn't be too long before you excused yourself from the conversation. The same happens every day in business presentations. We excuse ourselves by switching off.

Good presentations are natural and conversational in nature (watch any TED talk as proof) so don't focus on perfection. Focus on knowing what you want to talk about and what you would like the audience to take away from your talk.

Be conversational and you'll be listened to.

2. Be yourself

You know when you are talking to someone and something feels a bit off?

A little bit disingenuous? A little bit fake?

Maybe it's a business meeting and you feel like one of the attendees is acting.

It's pretty easy to spot, right!

It's pretty easy to spot when someone is being fake when you're face-to-face.

It's also pretty easy to spot when they're being fake on stage.

The lesson here is: Don't try and be someone you're not. Don't act. Just be yourself.

The audience will respond negatively to acting. The audience will respond positively when you

just be yourself.

3. If you make a mistake, move on

This is such a simple rule but such a difficult one for most people to follow.

Everyone wants to be perfect.

We are raised to avoid mistakes at all costs.

So, when a mistake happens in your presentation, it can be tempting to over-apologize, restart sentences, and beg forgiveness.

You mispronounce a word; You forget to say something; You get things mixed up. You are programmed to want to make things right.

But, here's the thing. Most people won't notice. And even if they do, they probably won't care.

If you make a mistake, just move on.

If you forget something, the audience doesn't know unless you tell them. If you mispronounce a word, the audience doesn't care. If you get things mixed up, just sort it out and continue.

4. Decide where you are going

Your boss gives you a week off.

You rush home, pack your bags, drive a couple of hours to the airport, and then think: Where should I go?

That's not the way it's meant to happen, right?

You decide where you want to go and then everything else flows from there. Buying the tickets. Knowing what to pack. Arriving at the airport with enough time to check-in.

The same should happen in your presentation. Decide why you're delivering your presentation before you do anything else.

What do you want the audience to do? What do you want the audience to take away from your talk? If you don't know the answers, then hang around the drawing board until you do.

5. Visual communication is everything

It's not the content.

Well it is. But it's not.

Your content is important. How you say it is important too.

But if your visual communication displays a lack of confidence and doesn't inspire the audience to listen to you, then your content is irrelevant.

Encourage the audience to listen to your great content by projecting credibility and confidence.

You project credibility and confidence through an open body position; strong posture; eye contact; gestures; and purposeful, but limited, movement.

6. Empathy

The ability to empathize with others is important in every area of life, including your presentation.

If you don't care about the audience they can tell.

Show them you empathize by demonstrating you understand the challenges they face relative to your topic.

If you're asking them to take some action which will be bothersome, empathize with them and at least attempt to show them a better future as a result of the bother they have to go to.

7. Your first words

The audience will be quick to judge you. Make sure your first words count.

Make a strong statement which intrigues them and displays your confidence.

Avoid boring your audience with standard "Good mornings" and "Thank yous".

Fire them up with something which gives them a reason to listen, like "From next week your administrative workload gets lighter."

8. Your final words

Your audience will most easily remember the first and last things you say.

In your final few words give them something positive to associate to your presentation.

"Together we can do this. Thank you." sounds nice, but this kind of positivity often feels hollow in business presentations.

Try something like: "Remember, all you need to do is make this small change when you get back to your desk. Next week, your workload become easier. Thank you."

9. Prepare your presentation in a specific order

This one's tough.

Most people will not be able to do this. And that probably includes you.

And why is this point so difficult?

Because it takes time. Because it goes against everything you are conditioned to think.

Here goes. Prepare your presentation in the following order:

Decide what the take-away is for the audience.

Draft out what points you need to cover to get the audience there.

Make a basic outline of your presentation (not a script).

If there is part of your presentation you are not sure about, start learning, start getting familiar with it.

Commence practice. Practice talking about each of the points in your presentation until you have a cohesive speech that you can deliver without prompts like notes and cue cards

Video-tape yourself and watch it back with a critical eye. Address only the two biggest problem areas you found, no more.

Time permitting, repeat step 6.

Build your slides. At this point use your latest video recording and only create slides which emphasize key points in your speech.

Practice your speech again with slides. At this stage your focus should be on not looking at the slides as you talk (this should be easy because you've already got your speech down).

10. Silence

If you take my advice in point 9, you'll notice something during the video playback in step 6.

Filler words.

The amount of "umms" and "okays" and other fillers in your speech will make you look unprepared, unpracticed, and unconfident (is that a word?)

Whenever you feel like you are not sure of what to say next, pause. Be silent.

Identify the times you use filler words and the feeling you have at that moment. Practice being silent instead.

Pauses are extremely effective in presentations and, counter-intuitively, make you look confident.

You'll appear cool, calm, and collected because you're not using filler words and you're comfortable with moments of silence.