Notes on Presenting Ideas
Explaining, Convincing, Story-Telling

Lecturing, presenting, addressing a group — these are tasks many of us must perform, in a wide variety of situations. But all presentations have one thing in common — they should engage the audience in an enjoyable thought process that leaves them better informed. Here are some notes on making a presentation more interesting and memorable. —*Allen*

Introduction

One of the cardinal rules of writing, especially fiction, creative non-fiction, screenplays, and teleplays, is "show, don't tell." In fact, perhaps surprisingly, that dictum is one of the main elements of effective presentation of *any ideas*.

This is because, on a broader scale, an essential principle of good presentation on any subject, in any field, is story-telling itself. Any essay, lecture, script, or syllabus is guaranteed to be more interesting, and have a more profound and lasting effect on its audience, when it's built around story-telling. Not surprisingly, good stories always emphasize showing what's happening, not just telling a sequence of events.

Many presenters feel it's their responsibility to convince their audience that what they're talking about it true. Fortunately, the people hearing a presentation will ultimately decide for themselves what they think is true, and a presentation focused on *convincing* them risks provoking counter-productive reactions. Presentations based on convincing the audience of the *validity* of the main ideas are likely to be received as selling, doctrine, or hyperbole, and as biased and short-sighted — and therefore less compelling rather than more so.

The best presentation approach is to craft a story, perhaps comprising a sequence of sub-stories, designed to present a continuous depiction and refinement of the central ideas. Let's explore how that can be done.

What Is a Story?

In the context of presenting specific ideas (as opposed to telling a story for the sheer fun of it), a story can be thought of as a sequence of events that makes the listener keep asking,

"Then what happened?" The events are selected to highlight the reasoning behind the ideas being presented, so that, in effect, the "main point" serves the same purpose as "the moral of the story" in a childhood fairy tale. There's much more to the general concept of a story, of course, but the main ingredient that helps make presentations work is curiosity, or even suspense.

To put this principle another way, we know that knowledge isn't truly complete unless it's based on both understanding and direct experience. We can think of the story as a way of adding a virtual experience to the information being presented, so the audience can absorb both aspects of the knowledge at the same time.

The challenge to the writer or presenter, therefore, is to find a way to turn main points into a sequence of events that will capture the audience's attention, hold their curiosity, and provide a tangible example of the main point. To this end, it's important to note that most of us, when we attend presentations, will probably forget everything but a very few main points. The best overall approach, therefore, is usually to present just one over-arching point as the primary "take-away," with no more than three or four additional things for the audience to remember. If the take-away is strong, then the other main points are most likely to stick.

The following three-part example illustrates how this story approach can work.

a. Not a Story

"People spread their moods to those around them. If a person is happy, those around them will tend to become happier, while if a person is sad, those around them will tend to become sad."

b. Converted to a Story

"Peter was worried about his certification exam, and he was irritated when his associates asked him questions, or interrupted his train of thought. As the exam day approached, his anxiety increased and he snapped at his friends, and dismissed other people as if they were of no value. Once the exam was over, Peter was all smiles. He was suddenly himself again, chatting with friends and joking about how worried he had been. At lunch, he complimented the waitress and left her a big tip."

c. Main Point of the Story

We've all experienced this phenomenon, which could be summarized as "Everybody loves a lover." If we're tired, anxious, angry, or afraid, our interactions with other people are likely to be fairly unpleasant. Conversely, if we feel happy, fulfilled, enthusiastic, safe, and self-sufficient, we're likely to also be friendly, generous, helpful, compassionate, and supportive of those we interact with. And of course that influence on others lifts their spirits too, making it more likely they'll spread some positive influence onto their contacts in turn.

Converting a concept or idea into a story can be surprisingly simple, but it requires looking at the idea in terms of how it affects people in realistic situations. Often we're so familiar

with a certain principle that it's not immediately obvious how to tell it as a story. One approach is to visualize the principle actually at work in the world before we attempt to build a story or scenario around it.

Telling

In the example above, the non-story version just tells the principle as a statement of fact. No evidence is given, and no examples. The principle has been reduced to nothing more than a claim, an assertion, which leaves the audience with nothing to work with other than faith in the presenter's credibility. And this is where "convincing" often raises its ugly head.

If the idea doesn't immediately resonate with the majority of the audience, some presenters feel the solution is to find a way to convince the audience that it's true. This means that the presenter has lost sight of the real goal, which is to impart knowledge — knowledge of how the principle works. Convincing only reinforces the intellectual component, and leaves out the experiential, the part that makes the knowledge *real*.

But the story version can also embody both aspects of understanding. Instead of just saying that Peter was anxious, the story also depicts him snapping at people and dismissing them without empathy. If the story were a character study (instead of a vehicle for making a point), we might have gone a step further, depicting Peter's anxiety more experientially, by showing his behavior more graphically.

Showing

In the story part of the example, Peter is described as "all smiles." This is a simple way to show how relieved he was. What's more, the story itself is a way of showing the main point in action, instead of just defining it. The audience is given a familiar human context to identify with, making the main point much more plausible and personal. To provide an audience with a story, we don't have to become master story-tellers — we just have to convert dry, theoretical statements into living examples of what we're trying to say.

When we learn things theoretically, we inevitably have to condense most of what we learned into a kind of outline that leaves out all the experiences we had *while we were learning*. But if we want to re-convey that knowledge, we have to re-create those learning experiences, or at least some of them, or our audience is left with little more than the outline. If that's all we have to offer, then we might just as well send them an email.

Convincing

When we really learn something, or what some refer to as *deep learning*, the brain process involves multiple dimensions of human experience, notably:

1. listening

2. correlating & assimilating
3. reasoning
4. exploring
5. questioning
6. applying
7. understanding
8. remembering

Stories may be the most fundamental model of how the brain learns, because all the above dimensions of experience are involved, and much more, a deep integration of direct experience and intellectual understanding.

Striving to convince, in contrast, represents the intent *to make* something true, or at least the intent *that it be accepted* as true. This essentially emotional approach doesn't result in the acquisition of complete knowledge, because it engages little more than listening and remembering, coupled with the even less rational notion of simply *believing*, which itself is not based on experience and understanding but mainly on:

1. credibility
2. authority
3. affinity

The most common objectives of convincing and its variations are not the acquisition of knowledge, but rather:

1. acceptance
2. adoption
3. agreement
4. belief
5. buy-in
6. faith
7. enrollment

The hallmarks of the attempt to convince are repetition, conditioning, polemics, and in some contexts even manipulation or suppression of dialog. While convincing, per se, may have its place in other contexts, it is a classic mistake in most scenarios where an engaging and memorable learning experience is the goal.

Success in convincing, for example, would generally be measured by the audience's degre of retention, persuasion, or conditioning. Unfortunately, these very metrics reflect the opposite of deep learning, which suggests that long-term influence of the "convincing strategy" may in fact reduce one's faculties of fine discrimination and even the learning ability itself.

What's the Purpose of Your Presentation?

What is the over-arching purpose of the presentation one is considering? Is it primarily to convey a deep understanding of some specific knowledge, or is it to present a convincing case that the knowledge should be *adopted* by the audience, with or without any substantial degree of understanding?

To convey ideas with real depth, main points should be presented with sufficient insight to assess them from other points of view. While this may be too lofty a goal for most presentations, it's a worthy vision of possibilities to be kept in mind.

In the context of presentation as a form of teaching, consider the choice of strategies from two perspectives:

1. Is *presentation* of the material sufficient? In other words, is it reasonable to assume that once the audience has been exposed to a certain "critical mass" of material, they will adopt and retain it? If so, then an emphasis on the tactics of convincing listed above might well be sufficient to achieve that goal.
2. Is it worthwhile for the audience to grasp the reasoning behind the knowledge, and evaluate for themselves its efficacy (or lack of it)? Is long-term retention and the ability to apply the material in the real world a primary aim of the presentation? If so, then the best strategy is to reinforce critical thinking (and the other dimensions of deep knowledge) by ***explaining***, via ***stories***.

To set out to convince is, in the end, a pre-existing advocacy for a specific point of view. When opinions, assessments, judgments, comparisons, or evaluations are involved, excessive advocacy may position the presentation as little more than a set of assertions, not intended to expand depth of knowledge. Such sessions quickly become sectarian and parochial, and by extension, closed to the full spectrum of spontaneous discourse.

At the same time, it's entirely natural to want to *sound* convincing, especially in the heat of an explanation, but if one's attention shifts to *convincing* the audience *as an outcome* of the explanation, the process morphs precariously from responsive explanation, toward mere selling and hype. Modern audiences are inundated by advertising and the manipulative language of sales, and have developed an unprecedented aversion to it. In the context of refinement of understanding, which is the essential goal of explaining, sales hype represents the exact opposite, since it is usually viewed as exaggeration at best, and blatant dishonesty at worst. In any presentation, even the appearance of selling and convincing can do significant damage.

Striving excessively to convince is a form of *performance*, and adept presenters can build considerable energy and focus. But forcing this performance is likely to divert a presenter's attention from the content and, even worse, from genuine rapport with the audience. Performance can also divert the presenter's own attention from their own deeper understanding of the material, further undermining the process. Use performance techniques with caution.

Often, when an audience perceives presenters striving to convince them of something, they may suspect that such speakers are not fully convinced themselves, or that they are just seeking reinforcement for their own beliefs.

Explaining

Explaining simply means showing how something works, or how it is constructed, or how it produces some result or effect. The essence of explaining is "how." When the audience understands the mechanics of some principle being explained, they are likely to experience a series of small "aha" responses, and in the best cases, they will enjoy a full-blown "eureka!" moment.

According to neuro-scientists, this "aha" experience triggers the body chemistry to produce a little dose of physiological pleasure. In other words, it feels good to understand something. This built-in tendency of the nervous system to reward understanding is probably at the basis of all human learning and achievement from infancy to rocket science and statesmanship. Explaining is a great way to give an audience a whole series of satisfying moments of comprehension.

In our story example, the description of Peter's behavior doesn't represent a detailed explanation — just a reminder to the audience, by a few familiar examples, of experiences in their own lives. The story could have gone into detail about the "how," explaining further that the relief Peter felt changed his body chemistry in certain ways, lowered his blood pressure, reduced the influence of stress hormones, etc. But the art of explanation lies partly in knowing how much explanation is appropriate.

An excess of explanation can be as counter-productive as the attempt to convince, and we're all too familiar with the expert who can't stop explaining something long after we've lost interest. The solution to the problem of over-explaining is two-fold: the presenter must ask himself how much the audience needs to know, and he must pay attention to the audience's response, especially to signs of restlessness and boredom.

A fascinating exercise is to watch some YouTube videos of people explaining things, and make a note of the point when you begin to lose interest. This will vary according to the subject, of course, but also according to the style of the presenter, and the sheer amount of information being presented. Don't try to learn the material, though — watch your own reactions and take note of how and when your response changes.

If it's a technical lecture, some presenters are so engaged in the material that their enthusiasm becomes something of a story in itself. Others may offer little more than a recitation of wikipedia material. Here are some presentation videos that might be interesting examples of this. These links were selected to illustrate different approaches to presentation, so try to pay attention to the lecturer's style (this may be difficult if you find the content especially interesting). I'm not judging these presenters, but some are clearly much better than others, even with very interesting material.

1. Critical Thinking & Spoon-Bending (the story begins around 5:00, but start at 0:00)
2. Intro to Statistics (presenter has an interesting perspective on his own style)
3. Shut Up (three minutes of Tom Peters on "silence" — required viewing for anyone)
4. Empathy & Leadership (what makes this presentation engaging?)

Listen to the Audience

This is a short and simple point, but it's as important as any of the others.

Striving to convince may occasionally be confused with *striving to be clearly understood*. Excellence in presenting ideas requires continual insight into the root causes of confusion or non-acceptance of the material by the audience. This can only be achieved by paying close attention to the audience — by *listening* carefully to the *listeners*.

Conclusion

Presenting is, of course, an art form, but we don't have to be great artists to describe how to cook spaghetti or safely drive a car. As humans, we are natural story-tellers and natural story-listeners, and we also spontaneously take pleasure in understanding new things. If those qualities are kept in mind while we speak to a group, the principles noted here will develop automatically, our presentations will continuously improve, and people will enjoy and remember what we have offered them.