CHAPTER 1

What Is Presentation?

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Communicating with presentations
- How this book is organized
- Storytelling, slides, and delivery
- The three principles

In late 2003, I was working for a consulting company as an analyst. The firm specialized in policy advising. Our clients were Russian ministries, senators, regulators, and formerly state-run, now privatized, companies. My job was to write reports to support decision-making processes. I had almost no contact with the clients, and frankly, I didn't suffer much because of that. I was quite happy just writing. But then came "the day." One of the firm's partners (to whom I am now very grateful) decided that it was time for me to see the big world. I had to present one of my recent reports before the firm's client.

NOTE I tried to transform my report into a presentation in a PowerPoint deck. It was a bullet-point, teleprompter-style nightmare, which is becoming rare nowadays. I remember my boss telling me to use more pictures. In 2004, "pictures" came mostly from a clip-art gallery, which came by default with Microsoft Office. Also, I had zero design skills and my taste wasn't exactly ideal. So, yes, there were a few pictures, but frankly, it would have been much better without them.

I spoke for about 30 minutes and it all went very well, or at least I thought so. Unfortunately, it turned out that the client didn't quite share my view. He didn't understand why the report was prepared, what the findings were, and why we wasted so much time and money. My bosses had to improvise another presentation on the spot, one which, happily, did the job. The client calmed down but asked that they never delegate any presentations to me again. I was so frustrated that I promised myself to master the skill in the next few months.

This is how it all started. Two years later, the client (albeit a different one) asked for me to present whenever possible. Four years later, I'd read Jim Collins's book *Good to Great* and decided to do for a living what I found I could do best—give presentations. Next year, I published a presentation called "Death by PowerPoint," which to my utter surprise went viral, having been viewed by more that one million people as of now. It was the greatest reassurance that the path that I've chosen is the right one. I'm currently teaching presentations at one of Russia's best business schools, doing corporate workshops, practicing as a consultant, and occasionally working with Mercator, Russia's leading producer of corporate films, business presentations, and infographics.

WHAT ARE PRESENTATIONS?

We live in a world in which nobody knows how to do anything. What I mean is that capitalism is based on the idea of division of labor and the labor is divided as never before. With division of labor as great as ever, we have to connect via words, symbols, and electronic code. We have to connect via phone conversations, written reports, e-mails and instant messaging, blogs, micro-blogs, and via just plain water cooler conversations—and presentations, yes, via presentations. We have to speak publicly more now than ever.

Presentations are an extremely complex and expensive form of human communication. The interaction is relatively short but the combined time of all the people involved costs a lot. The only explanation as to why people continue to give presentations despite their complexity and cost is that they are also sometimes tremendously impactful. Also, sometimes, there's a lot at stake. People give presentations before commencing expensive projects and after finishing

them. It makes sense to conduct extensive preparations in these cases, and there's almost no limit on how deep and wide you can go. You can rehearse, you can rearrange your slides, and you can research for new arguments in support of your point. So, whenever I am asked to "help with a presentation," my first question is inevitably, "What is the presentation in this case?" Answers differ vastly.

People frequently think that presentations are about delivery, about acting skills, and about how you say what you have to say. In the end, these aspects are what we see and hear, but are only the tip of the iceberg. People also think that presentations are mostly about slides. This is what I am asked to do a lot: make slides. The word "slides" has become synonymous with the word "presentations" in some organizations. People spend lots of time designing the right slides, making them so they can work with or without the actual presenter.

▶ Moreover, with more presentations being e-mailed rather than presented, this part is quickly becoming less important.

Apart from slides, there's another part that has to do with structure and argumentation, which is whole different domain. It has to do with what you say rather than how you say it. This part requires storytelling, script- and speechwriting skills, and a deep knowledge of the content. Can any single person possibly become an expert in all these fields? Can you become a present-day Renaissance person: a scriptwriter, a graphics designer, and a master of verbal and nonverbal delivery?

The short answer is "yes," but let me make a confession first. My education is in finance. As you are probably aware, finance is one of the most tedious professions on Earth. It's really not far from accounting. I spent three years working as a financial controller for Citibank. At some point, I even considered a career in one of the "Big Four" auditing firms. Before my involvement with presentations, I never seriously thought of myself as a "creative type." I was never good at oral communications; my only serious strength was writing. I wasn't even a good storyteller, as my reports didn't require any storytelling skills (or so I thought at the time). As I mentioned, I never studied graphics design in any systematic manner. I wasn't a good actor. So, yes, it is possible to become good at something as complex as presentations. It is possible even without any existing skills and without dedicating your whole life to it. After all, I didn't quit my job to learn how to give presentations. The first thing you need is motivation. I studied because of my initial failure; you might study because of your initial success. The second thing you need is a plan. The purpose of this book is to give you the plan.

Three more points about this book:

1. Figure 1-1 is a slide from my presentations training workshop. It's what I show people when I want to explain what presentations are. Coincidently, this is also how this book is organized. It is split into three major parts. Part I is about story structure, Part II is about slides, and Part III is about delivery. Also, I have three broad principles that I use in my work. In each part there are three chapters and each chapter will follow one broad topic, thus producing a nice three-by-three matrix. In this chapter, I give you a brief introduction to the three parts and three principles.

FIGURE 1-1: How this book is organized.

2. This book comes with illustrations, and I designed almost all of them by myself with no external help. I briefly considered hiring a professional graphics designer but realized that it would not be fair. If I say that everybody can learn to design slides by applying some principles and practicing, I should at least be able to do it myself. So I did. I am not a professional designer but at least they are authentic (which I believe is exceptionally important).
3. This book mostly relies on my five years of deliberate practice in the art of presentations. This is not a scientific book. I love science, and I care a great deal about empirical evidence. Unfortunately, however, some of the topics I discuss here are grossly under-researched. Sometimes, I have no other choice but to jump to conclusions, which just seem logical to me and are based on nothing but experience.

So, that's it for the introduction. Shall we get started?

STORY

Everyone who studies public speaking sooner or later gets to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. It is hardly a joyful read, so I'll just give you one concept from it. Aristotle says that there are three modes of persuasion: *logos*, *pathos,* and *ethos*. Logos is an appeal to the rational, pathos is an appeal to the emotional, and ethos is an appeal to the personality, which are the qualities of the speaker. That was in the 4th century B.C. Unfortunately, in the centuries that followed, scholars of rhetoric perfected logos and ethos and rejected pathos. You can see their attempts to appeal to pathos in the *New Oxford American Dictionary,* which gives the second definition for the word "rhetoric" as

"language designed to have a persuasive or impressive effect on its audience, but often regarded as lacking in sincerity or meaningful content." Well, pathetic.

I think I know precisely what led to this. It seems that scholars of rhetoric deal with pathos because they think they have to, not because they truly want to. Public speakers always put themselves in opposition to poets. In their eyes they were decision makers and the seekers of truth, while poets were lowly entertainers. But canons of public speaking always included entertainment. Hence, the classical Roman *docere, movere, delectare* (educate, motivate, entertain), but only because the public demanded entertainment. Speakers would love to just inform and motivate, but, unfortunately, this isn't an option. So, they struggle with it, poor chaps. Even today I meet speakers (mostly scientists) who believe that an appeal to reason is inherently ethical and persuasive, whereas an appeal to emotions is deceptive and unworthy of a real educator. They are doing it only because they can't avoid it.

By contrast, poets—and I use this word in its broad Greek sense meaning also artists, dramatists, and writers—always loved entertaining. This was their job. Aristotle himself admits, "It was naturally the poets who first set the movement going." It seems that in the past couple of centuries, our civilization has made truly dramatic progress in storytelling. We started to tell more and better stories. Better yet, we learned how stories should be constructed.

I won't be covering logos much in this book. This isn't because I hate logos (I love it); it's because this field is pretty much covered already. For those of you interested in pure logos, I recommend an excellent book called *The Minto Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing, Thinking, & Problem Solving* by Barbara Minto. Problems with logos are well known. Such presentations look very reasonable and even persuasive but aren't very motivating. People nod their heads and then mind their own business. Nelson Mandela said, "Don't address their brains. Address their hearts." However beautiful this phrase is, I don't fully agree with it. I don't think we should avoid addressing the brains. As scientists, businesspeople, and activists, we have to deal with facts and logic. Storytellers love to contrast stories with statistics by saying that stories are a much more persuasive and effective means of communication, but really, there's no clear evidence for that. They are more entertaining—that's obvious—but that does not necessarily make them more effective from a practical standpoint. But secondly and most importantly, there isn't much difference between storytelling and fact telling anyway. Storytelling is and always was the essence of business presentations. Storytelling is nothing but putting facts in a sequence and making connections.

Funny as it may sound, storytelling should not be confused with telling stories. Telling an anecdote is just an attempt to illustrate your concept, to provide an example or counterexample, to make your audience more engaged. This might be a useful tool but that's not what Part I of this book is about. I don't just suggest you use stories within your presentation, I suggest you adopt the story structure for the whole presentation.

NOTE There's an ongoing dispute about the relative persuasiveness of stories versus causal evidence and statistics, with no clear winner. Some empirical studies have concluded that stories indeed elicit significantly fewer objections than statistical evidence, supposedly by going around the conscious mind (Slater, 1990; Slater & Rouner, 1996, 1997). Some studies have concluded that anecdotal evidence is more persuasive than statistics, and other studies have concluded otherwise. Meta-analysis by Allen and Preiss in 1997 found a small but statistically significant advantage of statistics over storytelling. But again, these people are using statistics to prove that statistics are more persuasive. I think it is safe to say that the jury is still out on this one.

▶ Stories aren't just facts; stories are facts with souls.

Yes, storytelling is a popular, even hip, subject. We are a storytelling species, and as far as I'm aware, there's nobody else in this game on this planet. Stories as a form of communication existed well before writing and they were optimized for oral transmission of facts. Stories engage emotions to make facts more memorable. Your long-term memory and your emotions come from the same part of the brain: the limbic system of our paleomammalian brain. Stimulating emotions improves recall of facts; this is a well-established scientific fact.

Stories don't have to be in opposition to logic, either. You can't have a story without logic. The plot has to develop according to certain rules; you can't just introduce random stuff whenever you please. Stories are the logic of life. Stories are meant to explain events; they form the chain of cause and effect. Of course, this explanation might be just an illusion, but you cannot have an explanation without a sequence, right? Any sequence of events is a proto-story. You just need to structure it properly and add some spice. So, I don't think you need to contrast storytelling with statistics or causal explanations. You need to contrast structured fact-telling with unstructured fact-telling.

▶ Stories unite multiple disjointed facts and concepts into one solid experience.

In any case, most presentations consist of facts or logical arguments put into a sequence. The problem is that this sequence often makes no sense. It is dull. It is difficult to follow. It gives no answer to the question "So what?" We are forced to follow the train of thought without understanding where it is leading us and why. Presenters tend to put a lot of dots on the board without really connecting them. It's no surprise that with structure like this, they have trouble following their own train of thought. They forget what to say next. How can you forget what to say next in a story? Stories are convenient to tell, pleasant to listen to, and easy to remember.

It is true that a purely factual story is usually not as entertaining as a made-up one. The good news is that a factual story is much easier to create. You don't need to make up facts. The facts are already there. All you need to do is select the right facts and put them in a sequence. If this seems like cherry-picking to you, you are right. You have to engage in cherry-picking. Your time is always limited, and you have to speak about some topics and leave some others out. But storytelling isn't about leaving inconvenient facts out of the story. Rather, it's about

integrating them. Inconvenient facts have a surprising effect, and surprise is one of the cornerstone elements of a well-crafted narrative. So, no, storytelling isn't about picking "the right" facts; it's about making what seem like the "wrong" facts work together. It's about making meaning out of chaos. And this is what Part I of this book is about.

SLIDES

In 1979, Hewlett-Packard introduced the first program for editing presentation slides. It was called BRUNO. It didn't become a big hit (or, in fact, any hit at all) and was soon discontinued. However, the idea of a visual slide editor endured. The demand was great, but software limitations at the time were severe. Only eight years later, when a small startup called Forethought, Inc., produced a piece of software called PowerPoint 1.0, did presentation software become a major hit. Microsoft bought the company, and PowerPoint soon became part of its Office suite. Ten years later, PowerPoint was everywhere. It became ubiquitous in boardrooms, conference rooms, classrooms, ballrooms, and even churches. As with any early mass-production attempt, the quality was quite poor, and the environment suffered. In 2001, Angela Garber, a journalist writing for *Small Business Computing,* coined the phrase "Death by PowerPoint." The world had enough. "Why can't you turn off the projector and just speak like a person?" people would ask, and every other book on delivery skills was trying to address this problem.

Let me make a confession: Despite all the bad rep, I love slides. I think they are fantastic. I have loved them all my life, even when I didn't know they existed. In school my favorite class was biology, where we had a gigantic tree of species painted all over the wall. I loved visual aids, and I loved filmstrips. Tinkering with slides is what I do to procrastinate. I don't agree with the notion "you are the star, not the slides." I like showing the slides to the audience. I love that look on people's faces when they see a great slide. It took me a while to figure out how to make them properly and I am proud to share with you some of my insights.

To me, there are two reasons you should leave your projector on:

- For one thing, we might simply forget what to say next, which might be because we didn't bother to make our structure memorable enough to begin with, but never mind that for now. PowerPoint might have created many problems, but it solved at least one: The fear of forgetting what to say is gone. In Ancient Greece or Rome, speakers didn't use notes (mostly because there was no paper) and *memoria*, the art of memorizing, was one of the five core skills that speakers needed. Thanks to PowerPoint, we no longer need to memorize anything, and we can speak without notes. I don't know about you but I hate memorizing things. I think this change has fundamentally revolutionized public speaking.

The downside, of course, is that slides became notes. We started using the slide projector as a teleprompter (and when I say "we," I am proudly including myself). Figure 1-2 shows one of the first presentations I ever prepared (in 2004). This was a 20 minute–long talk, with nine slides and just two diagrams. Then, I discovered *Presentation Zen: Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery* by Garr Reynolds and *Beyond Bullet Points: Using Microsoft Office PowerPoint 2007 to Create Presentations That Inform, Motivate, and Inspire* by Cliff Atkinson. They explained to me what the slides are for; slides are visual aids, not prompters. This changed everything for me. Figure 1-3 is an excerpt from my presentation circa 2006. As you see, there's much less text and many more pictures. The design is still horrible, though.

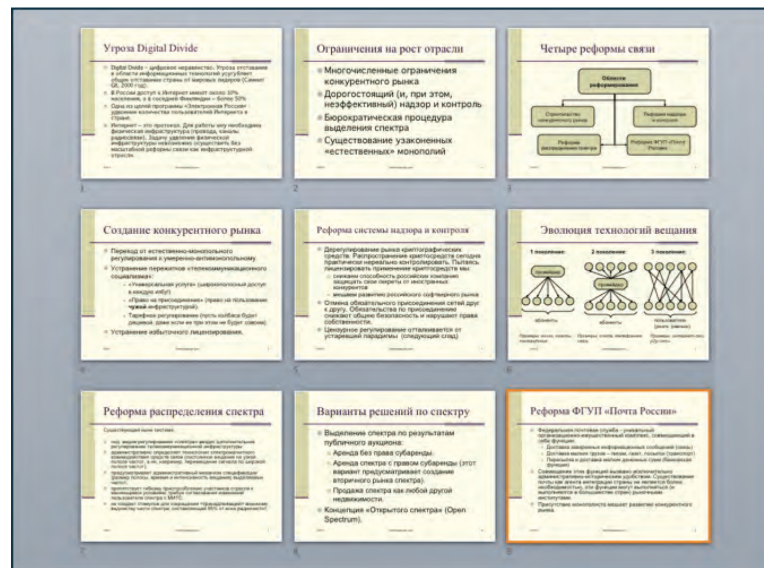

FIGURE 1-2: My slides from 2004.

- The second reason to leave our projectors on is a widely known phenomenon called the *pictorial superiority effect.* Simply put, it means that under most circumstances, people are much better at reading and remembering pictures than words.

> **NOTE** In one widely cited study by Weiss and McGrath (1992), people were able to recall in 72 hours just 10 percent of what they heard but 20 percent of what they saw—twice as much. What's even more stunning, they were able to recall 65 percent of the information when it was presented in both visual and auditory form. So, by turning off your projector, you are doing your audience a great disservice. Don't do it; just make sure your slides are worth viewing.

FIGURE 1-3: My slides from 2006—getting better.

Our capacity for processing concrete images is much greater than our capacity for processing abstract knowledge. Danish science writer Tor Norretranders, in his book *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size,* quotes neurophysiological research measuring the bandwidth of various human senses. The results are summarized in Figure 1-4. Notice that the second diagram is in kilobits per second, which is 1,024 times faster than bits per second" shown in the first diagram. Not only is our processing mostly unconscious, but the unconscious bandwidth for vision is 100 times more powerful than for hearing.

There's an old English saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words" and a corresponding Russian saying, "It's better to see once than to hear a hundred times." Visual aids take advantage of all this bandwidth, but, of course, only if you use pictures rather than text. If you use text projected on a screen, because processing of text is mostly conscious, you are still engaging the conscious mind; the advantage here is much less dramatic.

So leave the projector on. It helps. Still, despite the progress with slides made over the past 10 years, there are many more unanswered questions. Most of them have to do with illustration and design. Slides aren't like anything we've ever encountered before. They are not reports; they are much more condensed, focused, and concise. They are not spreadsheets; they aren't made for analysis. The reader should be able to grasp the meaning of the slide in several seconds. They are not like printed materials; they are not made for careful reading. They should grab your attention and quickly influence you. They should inform, explain, or persuade.

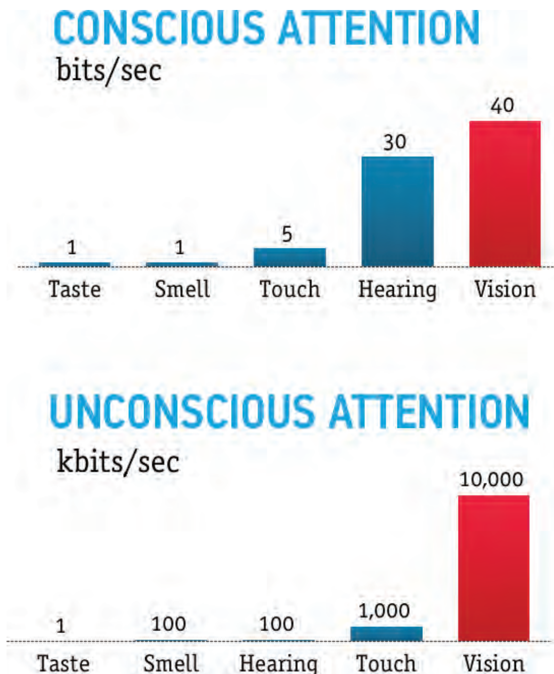

FIGURE 1-4: Conscious and unconscious bandwidth.

In order to design slides, you have to use information architecture. You have to understand how to visualize and illustrate and know how to make it all look aesthetically pleasing. This requires a lot of investment of time and effort on your part. Is it worth it? The answer largely depends on the nature of your job, that is, how much do you need to communicate and how important it is. Overall I think yes, it is well worth it. Let me give you three reasons to invest your time in design—or rather, three rebuttals to the excuses I always hear for not investing.

1. **"It's all very subjective."** I hear this a lot. No, it isn't. Of course, it isn't a precise science, but it's not wild stabs in the dark, either. There are certain rules and principles one can follow, and there are well-established tools one can use that almost guarantee better results. Companies that invest in design do dramatically better than companies that don't. Why would it be different for individuals?

   In 2004, the British Design Council, one of the world's oldest design associations with 60 years of history, released the Design Index Report. The report analyzed the impact of investments in design on the company's stock performance. The authors separated what they call "design-led" companies like Easyjet or Reuters, known for their massive investments in design, from the rest of the market. It was no surprise that those companies produced much better performance for their investors and, I'm quoting from the report,

"not just for a few weeks or months but consistently over a solid decade." The difference between the Design Index and the British Index FTSE 100, which includes the country's 100 largest companies, was a full 200 percent. In the last 10 years, the price of Microsoft's stock went down by 27 percent while the stock of Apple rose by 2,880 percent. Okay, Apple did start quite low and not all of it can be attributed to design, but almost 3,000 percent difference? Isn't design *the* secret to success?

2. **"Yeah, but I'm not a designer. Let the designer do this job."** This is known as "the division of labor argument." Although I do agree that specialization is key in any field, the problem is that design is not just "any field." Over the past 20 years, design has emerged as an interdisciplinary language. We now communicate in design. In the 10th century you had to be able to talk and to follow established civility protocols to function successfully as a member of society. People who were able to write had an advantage. By the 20th century you had to be able to write; that was the standard requirement. At this point, in developed nations, there are very few jobs you can get if you cannot write, and those you can get aren't particularly safe or well paid. Everybody knows how to write, so it is no longer a competitive advantage. My point is that design is the new writing, much like writing was the new talking once.

The problem with leaving design to the designers is that they mostly don't care about your content. All they can do is make it pretty, but not more meaningful. And being meaningful is what communication is all about. Of course, there are good designers who actually study the subject before designing anything, but they are really expensive. For most of your presentations, you won't be having access to those kinds of designers. The argument for why you are the best designer for your slides is summarized in Figure 1-5.

If you want your ideas to have that competitive advantage, if you really want to sell your ideas to your audience, you have to learn something about design and apply it to improving your slides.

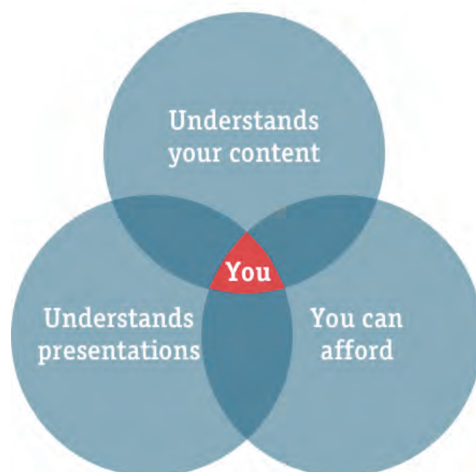

FIGURE 1-5: An ideal presentation designer is you.

It certainly makes sense to hire a professional designer or even a specialized presentation design firm if you need a sales deck that every salesperson will be using or if you are about to go for an IPO. But for most of your routine, everyday presentations, you will be the one doing it. Also, what if you have to change something in your presentation prepared by the pros? You're stuck if you don't know how. In *An Inconvenient Truth*, a documentary following Al Gore's presentation about climate change, we can see Gore himself tinkering with his slides. Even Al Gore does it.

3. **"Who cares, these are just slides."** Every salesman knows that polished shoes help selling. You may not work in a business where people wear formal shoes, but I think you still get what I mean. So, salespeople polish their shoes. As far as I'm concerned, slides are much more important than shoes. Why don't they get the same polish? "But I'm not a salesperson." Yes, you are! We are all in the business of selling. We sell ideas to our bosses, to our colleagues, to our employees, to our students, and to our peers. Of the slides shown in Figure 1-6, which one do you think has a better chance of selling anything?

FIGURE 1-6: Which one sells better?

The left slide is from a random presentation I pulled off the U.S. Department of Education's website. Sad, isn't it? The right slide was "designed" by me in about two minutes. I didn't change the content and even tried to preserve the original colors. I replaced the font with a somewhat more readable one and removed the busy background. Suddenly, it looks much more respectable and more dignified, and is definitely easier to read.

If the presenter doesn't care, people sense that. Some people care about the content but don't care about the look, and I think this is wrong. Beatrice Warde, an American typographer, wrote once, "People who love ideas must have a love of words, and that means, given a chance, they will take a vivid interest in the clothes which words wear."

What she meant by "clothes which words wear" was typography, but I think this quote applies to a much broader field of design, too. If you love your content, you have to care about

the form. If you care about your audience, you have to care about your slides. I don't see how you can avoid it. Part II of this book will help.

DELIVERY

Delivery is the final and most challenging part of a presentation. Not the most difficult or the most important—that award goes to storytelling—but the most challenging, the most frightening. I never heard of slide preparation fright or storytelling fright, but stage fright is common. The reason delivery is so frightening is because it's live and it's final. You cannot undo it; once it's done, it's done.

NERVES VERSUS STAGE FRIGHT

I never had stage fright. This isn't to suggest that I was always good onstage, but I don't remember being scared. In my childhood, I was the lead singer in a children's band and coming onstage was a relatively mundane experience for me. I was nervous but never frightened. Later, I came onstage as a dancer, singer, martial arts practitioner, business trainer, business school lecturer, personal development coach, comedian, and actor. I was still getting nervous (but never to the point of being paralyzed), and I think it is pretty much normal to feel this way. Anxiety never quite goes away, and it's always worse when the role or the place is new to me.

If you have serious stage fright, one that really prevents you from speaking, I suggest you seek professional help. Scientific branches of psychotherapy (like cognitive behavioral therapy, CBT) have made some truly dramatic progress over the past 20 years. But if all you have is general anxiety, just live with it. Trust me, nobody will notice.

There are basically two ways to deal with your fear: the first is to prepare and the second is to learn to improvise. And this is what Part III of the book is about—preparation and improvisation in public speaking. I think there are two versions of public speaking, there was 1.0, and now there is 2.0. The first approach was to be very formal and regulated. Books on public speaking 1.0 overwhelm you with advice on all things proper: proper dress, proper speech, proper timing, proper posture, and so on. Public speaking 2.0 is much more relaxed and much more demanding at the same time. You cannot get away with simply following the rules anymore. You have to put in your soul. You cannot just do the prepared talk and leave. You must have a conversation with your audience and react to their feedback, both verbal and nonverbal.

Public speaking 1.0 was built around the idea of control. Controlling time, controlling emotions, and controlling the audience. Public speaking 2.0 (or should I say presenting?) is built around the idea of losing control. Of course, in order to lose control, you first have to have it. You can't lose something you never had in the first place.

Public speaking is a lot like martial arts in this sense, or, in fact, like any activity that requires complex coordination of the mind and body. When a student first comes to a martial arts school, they know how to fight intuitively. If somebody attacks them, they react, sometimes quite effectively. However, when their teacher starts telling them what to do, they soon become disoriented in the sea of new information. After a while, they master formal exercises that may look cool but aren't really very close to an actual fight. The next stage is when you stop doing attacks, blocks, or holds that you know, and focus on the one thing you can focus on (which is your opponent) and just let your body do the rest of the job. It's the same in public speaking. If you want to do well with your public speaking, you have to let your body do the job.

You cannot plan your speech pretty much like you cannot plan your fight. I once read in Brian Tracy's book on public speaking (1.0) called *Speak to Win: How to Present with Power in Any Situation*, "The very best talk of all is when the talk you planned, the talk you gave, and the talk you wish you had given all turn out to be the same." Let me tell you: no, it's not. First of all, it never happens that way. Never, ever. But second, if the talk you planned is exactly the same as the one you gave, it's because you knew beforehand everything your audience knows, which is unlikely to the point of being impossible, or you missed an opportunity to learn something from your audience. If everything goes as planned, if nothing unexpected is happening, you will soon be dying of boredom and so, by the way, will your audience. If the talk you gave is the same as the one you wanted to give—that means you either reached your life's ideal (which, again, is highly unlikely) or you stopped developing. My very best talks of all were the ones where I came prepared and my plan *almost* worked, which means that while following the plan, I encountered new and entirely unexpected problems, solved them creatively on the spot, and came out victorious. This is public speaking 2.0.

I'm not suggesting that Brian Tracy or any other remarkable speaker of the past stopped at the formal stage. But they taught what they'd been asked to teach, which was the formalities. These formalities aren't enough anymore. This is why the last chapter of Part III is devoted entirely to the most difficult and daring topic: stage improvisation.

THE THREE PRINCIPLES OF PRESENTING

This book is built around three principles that I follow in my work. I think having principles is important. Principles are not rules; they are much broader and less intrusive. Although you don't always have to follow these principles, you do need to think twice before going against them. On

the downside, they are much less concrete. You have to figure out how to apply them in any given situation. English writer Somerset Maugham said once that there are three rules for writing novels, but unfortunately, nobody knows what they are. It's the same with presentations. I would love to give you three rules for presenting, but I don't know what they are. So I am giving you three principles with lots of examples. You have to figure out the rest yourself. The principles are *thesis*, *antithesis,* and *synthesis*—or, as I call them for the purposes of my work, *focus*, *contrast,* and *unity* (see Figure 1-7).

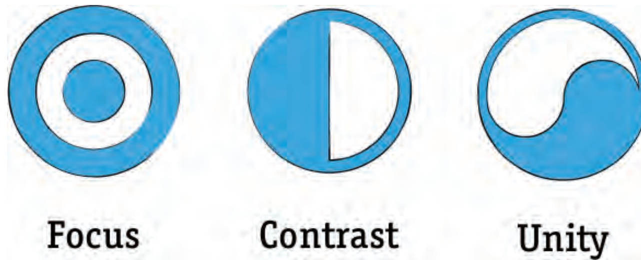

FIGURE 1-7: The three principles of presenting.

NOTE These principles are fairly universal and not unique to presentations in any way. I did not invent them; I had heard of them well before I started studying presentations, but I only really understood them through my work. They've been around for a couple of centuries after being brought to prominence by the German author Heinrich Moritz Chalybäus in his account of the philosophy of Georg Hegel. It turns out, however, that Hegel used these terms only once and attributed them to Immanuel Kant. The names for the principles were probably suggested by another German philosopher, Fichte. It's a complicated story. My subsequent investigation led me to believe that the ancient Hindus developed these principles 5,000 years ago. In other words, they've been around for quite a while.

The principles are, of course, somewhat arbitrary. There are probably other useful principles out there; these are simply the ones that I can keep in my short-term memory and apply successfully. As I said, I did not invent them. They crystallized after I noticed that I keep repeating mostly the same words during my workshops. As Jim Collins said in *Good to Great*, "it doesn't so much matter what your values are, it really matters that you have them." So, I have them. Let me tell you what they are so you can have them, too.

Focus

The principle of focus states that every story, slide, or performance has the key focal point to attract attention. In any successful communication, this point is defined very early and the rest

of the content is organized "around" this point. In a story, this is usually the hero. On a slide, this is usually the focal point, the brightest, the biggest, or the most emotional element (like a human face) of the composition that attracts the eye. In a live performance, this is most likely to be the speaker's persona, the answer to the question, "Who is presenting?"

Why do you need a focus? Simply put, because you cannot say everything you know and the audience can't remember everything you say (see Figure 1-8). The audience has its cognitive limits; that's why you have to prioritize and thus make certain elements of your communication more important and others less important.

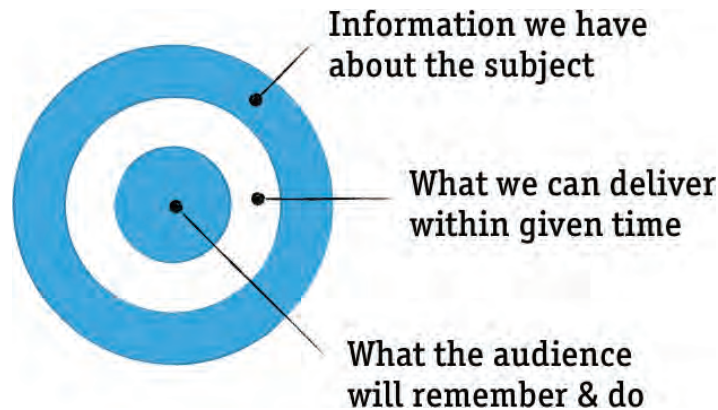

FIGURE 1-8: Why you need to focus.

How limiting are those limits? In 1957, George A. Miller, a Harvard psychologist, published an article that became not only one of the most cited papers in the history of psychological research but the subject of a popular urban legend as well. You've probably heard of it. It was titled "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on our Capacity for Processing Information." It gave birth to one of the older PowerPoint "rules," which is seven bullets per slide and seven words per bullet. When I first heard of it, I found this rule way too strict. No more than seven words per bullet? How on Earth am I supposed to express myself?

NOTE Miller's original paper is available online at `http://goo.gl/NOTCp`.

It turned out I was right in resisting the "rule," but for entirely the wrong reasons. First of all, the original research obviously had nothing to do with PowerPoint or presentations; it was conducted well before PowerPoint came to existence. Second, Miller was researching a short-term memory limit in terms of "chunks" of information, but nobody really knew at the time what exactly constituted a "chunk." In his original experiments, he presented students with letters, words, or numbers and asked how many they could recall after the presentation. Most

of the subjects were able to recall five digits without any mistakes; more than five digits often constituted a problem (see Figure 1-9).

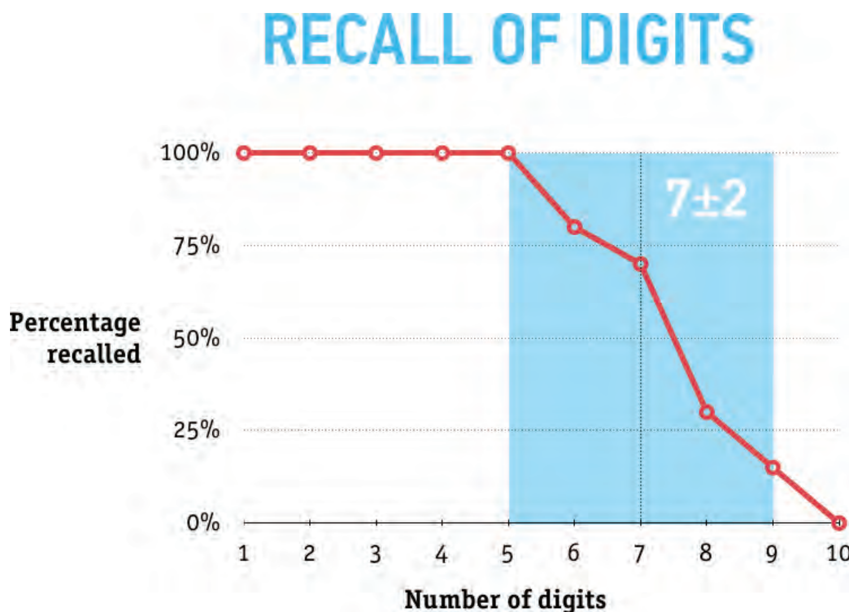

FIGURE 1-9: Miller's digit-recall diagram.

However, it later turned out that digits aren't the same as words or concepts. Subsequent experiments by Murdock (1962) and others came to different figures for the working memory limit: between three and five chunks. Building on this research, Nelson Cowan, professor of psychology of the University of Missouri, suggested that the limit for an average adult is about four chunks, which is where the scientific consensus currently stays. In 2002, Klaus Oberauer proposed an extension to this model by adding even more narrow focus embedded in the four-element focus, which holds just one chunk at a time. What he means is that we can actively pay attention to just one thing at a time. But we can switch our attention to any of the other three things (no more!) that we simultaneously keep in our short-term memory.

NOTE In late 2010, Apple announced an update to its iOS, its operating system for mobile devices. It was described as having "100+ new features and innovations." However, the landing page for the new iOS did not list all those 100+ features. Instead, it showcased just four of them, presumably the most important for the users: multitasking, folders, AirPrint, and AirPlay. Apple's marketers understood that our attention is limited and that you can't show everything you have.

▶ So this is the focus principle: build your communication around one central message and accompany it with three to four supporting messages.

When I design a storyline for a presentation, I try to have one core message and no more than four major parts. When I design the slide, I always ask myself, "Where is the center of this slide?" I formulate the key message and try to put it in the header in the largest font. Although I am not the biggest fan of bullets, when I have bullets, I try to have three, maximum four, bullets. This also applies to pictures on the same slide. And when I press the Next button on my remote during a presentation, I try to make sure that I expose the audience to no more than one message at a time. If I have a complex diagram, I present it either in small chunks or give the audience time to digest it before I start talking again. You might think that this is the same mindless, robotic application of the 7±2 rule, except now it's the 4±1 rule. Well, I have to say that you might be right except that this one actually works. Can I do 5? 6? 10? Of course, I can. I will think twice, though.

Contrast

▶ The principle of contrast states that ideas are understandable only in contrast with other ideas.

As the old saying goes, "who has never tasted bitter, knows not what is sweet." The problem with most business presentations is that they consist of facts and only facts. The facts don't have any inherent meaning of their own. They only make sense in relation to other facts. You need to compare things. Your audience needs to understand the proportions. They need to see the background. They need to see change. They need to see opposition. If you saw *Jurassic Park,* you might remember that a T-Rex can only see things when they move. In a way, we are all like this: We pay attention only when we see things changing and becoming different.

There was a joke about an English gentleman who was marooned by pirates and who built three huts on his island. One was his home, the second was his club, and the third was the club that he ignored. It's funny because it's true. We need that club that isn't our home. And we need that second club, too. Without the second club, the first club doesn't look all that attractive. This might seem irrational, but this is how things are.

NOTE Dan Ariely, a behavioral economist at MIT, gives the following example in his book *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions*. Suppose you are looking for a house and your estate agent offers you three houses, one of which is contemporary and two that are colonial in style. They all cost about the same but one of the colonials has a certain disadvantage. According to Ariely (who actually conducted this experiment), in the end, people are much likely to choose the colonial without the disadvantage, even over the contemporary house, because it is easy to compare, and they feel like they understand something about it. They feel like this one won the competition.

Sports in which two teams cooperate aren't particularly popular. There is no TV show or commercial movie without a conflict, a drama, a struggle. Every religion defines things in terms of black and white: saints and sinners, heaven and hell, samsara and nirvana. A conflict grabs people's attention. Conflicts have unpredictable outcomes; they are inherently

interesting to follow. But there isn't much conflict in a typical business presentation. That is why the audience falls asleep. Presenters tell only positive aspects of things. They shy away from conflict and controversy. Or they stage a weak conflict where one side is the clear winner right from the beginning. They make things predictable, and predictability is boring. The great physicist Niels Bohr once declared that a great truth is a statement whose opposite is also a great truth. We need to learn to stage fair fights. Of course, there's a risk of not winning, but that's the whole idea (see Figure 1-10).

The same applies to slides. Side-by-side comparisons are always interesting to watch. Charts that show change are the best proof. Diagrams that have "the reds" fighting "the grays" will never be boring. On the aesthetic level, you need contrast, too. You need to separate headers from the rest of the text. You need to separate important data from the supplementary. You need to separate text from the background. There is a fine distinction in design between a good conflict (usually called contrast) and bad conflict (usually called conflict). You'll need to understand this contrast, too.

In delivery, contrast is as important as anywhere else. Most presenters have a certain pace and style. After several minutes, the audience adapts to this style, and the presenter stops being new and, therefore, interesting. Especially with longer presentations, you absolutely need to be different. And that is the contrast principle: remember to provide an antithesis to your thesis. There is a dark side (sometimes literally) in anything, and the audience needs to see it to remain engaged.

Unity

This is the most difficult principle to explain. In a story, there are certain parts that produce a psychologically satisfying experience. If you lead your audience through the right points, they feel like they got something that goes beyond the journey itself, something transcendent, something transformative. The path that great presentations travel looks like the S-curve, which seems to be a universal model of change (see Figure 1-11).

The principle of unity states that once properly aligned, conflicting parts create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

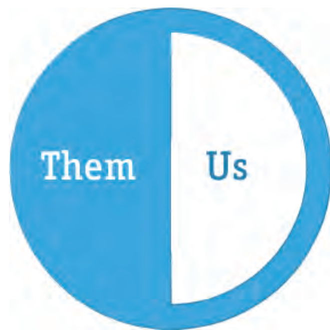

FIGURE 1-10: Contrast.

FIGURE 1-11: The unity S-curve.

We travel through difficulties (contrast) toward a greater goal (focus). This experience is memorable. Once people hear a well-crafted story, they remember it very close to how you told it. They cannot forget the beginning or the end—maybe something in the middle. They can replace the end if they don't like it, but they can't forget it. The story now lives beyond you.

Which of the two shopping lists shown in Figure 1-12 do you think is easier to memorize? When I ask this question at my seminars, about 30 percent of the audience get it, mostly those who cook. Items on the second list make up a recipe (for pancakes). Items on the first list are just random stuff one buys at the supermarket. There's no unifying pattern. Any of the hundreds more items at the supermarket could be there on that list. Conversely, the second list is closed. If you forget one item on the list for pancakes, you can fill in the blank. In essence, there is just one item on this list, not six. This is what unity does; it compresses information without losing anything.

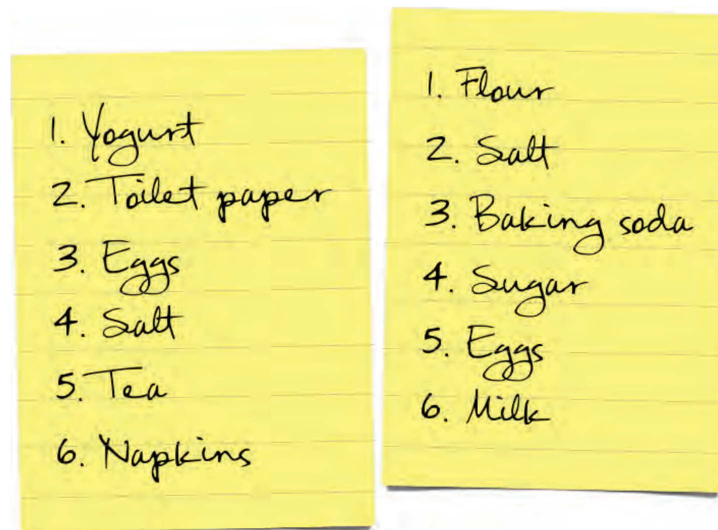

FIGURE 1-12: Which list is more memorable?

It takes a lot of time to produce the second list. All the ingredients are carefully matched. If you mess up just one of the ingredients, the whole deal will be off. Items on the first list are replaceable and nobody would notice if you deleted one of them. What makes the second list work is the connection. This makes things whole, believable, and authentic.

NOTE Take *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien as an example. It is authentic not because it's factually true. It's not. It is authentic because of Tolkien's fanatical devotion to details. Tolkien managed to create a united, consistent world with potential for many stories. Tolkien chose to tell just a couple of those stories and many more remained untold. This is why the trilogy produced an unprecedented amount of fan art. Once the rules of the game are balanced, many more people jump on the bandwagon.

It's the same with slides. Elements of your slide should come together to produce a unified whole. If your slide background imitates wood, your bullets should imitate nails. This is consistency. If this is too artsy for you, don't make a wooden background in the first place. It is also not just about adding stuff. It's about deleting stuff, too. Anything that doesn't fit should be mercilessly removed. Extra lines, unnecessary elements, all the scaffolding you used for the purposes of design, need to be cleaned up.

It is also the same with delivery. When you are onstage, there is only one thing that is important. And it's not what you say. It is who you are. You are a character, and this is your role. You have your personal history. You have your story to tell, and you are telling it. Nobody else can tell that story as good as you. When people retell your story later, your character is traveling with it. They are inseparable. Of course, that is if you are an authentic character. You are not an actor; you cannot just become anybody. This isn't about pretending. You must be yourself, but slightly different: prepped for the stage, for the dialogue, and for action.

▶ Strange as it may seem, despite all this care and attention to details, excellent presentations are never perfect. The art of leaving imperfections in your work is subtle but deeply touching.

NOTE In terms of presentations, TED is perhaps the best conference in the world. If you haven't seen it, go look at `www.ted.com` and experience it yourself. They put most of their speeches online, and they are very good with almost no exceptions. The time limit there is just 18 minutes, so it won't take you much time to watch a couple of presentations. It's a great place to learn. Al Gore, Malcolm Gladwell, Seth Godin—all the best speakers are there. Check it out.

Sir Ken Robinson, a British educational expert, presenting at TED in 2010, spoke about how education is destroying people's authenticity by dislocating them from their natural talents. Human talents are tremendously diverse, he says, but instead of cultivating those talents individually, we've adopted a "fast food model of education." Of course, it's much cheaper that way, but the results are sub-par. A lot of books and workshops on presentations adopt precisely the same approach by giving out lots of advice on "proper," standardized behavior onstage. I would argue that is not what many of us need. We need to learn to be ourselves.

Being yourself onstage is really difficult. People are complex creatures, with many different character traits. If your presentation is just 20 minutes (or even 18 if you are at TED), you have to choose which side to show. Showing just one side violates the contrast principle, showing too many sides violates the focus principle. You have to select the traits that go well together. Ken Robinson, whose 2006 TED talk has been watched more than 8.5 million times as of this writing, switches between being dead serious and being hysterically funny. Jill Bolte Taylor (also more than 8 million views) looks like a very nice woman until she brings onstage an actual human brain, which is creepy! Psychologist Barry Schwartz (2 million views) looks quite comfortable in his T-shirt, shorts, and sneakers, something you should consider twice before wearing at a high-profile conference even if you're not presenting.

So, unity is about establishing constraints, sometimes completely arbitrarily, and following them to ridiculous lengths. It is about being consistent yet imperfect. It is about being human. And this is what the last part of this book is about.

SUMMARY

Table 1-1 gives a brief starting summary for the book. It works nicely as a checklist. When I say briefly, I really mean it. You might want to write your own questions here. I will be covering much more than three questions in each chapter. Some questions may not be clear yet, but keep in mind that this is just the beginning.

TABLE 1-1: A Summary of Presentation Secrets Key Questions

	FOCUS	CONTRAST	UNITY
Storytelling	What's the goal? What's the point? What are the 3–4 supporting points?	What's the problem? What's the problem for the audience? Who is fighting whom for what?	Does the story follow the S-curve? What's the overall, united theme? Can I delete anything?
Slides	What's the goal of the slide? What's the focal point on the slide? Do those two match?	What am I comparing? Is the focal point really different from the secondary, background information?	Which style does the slide follow? Does the font match the background? Can I delete anything?
Delivery	Am I being clear? Am I making eye contact with the audience? Am I reacting to their feedback?	Who am I fighting? What's my inner conflict? Am I really challenging the audience?	Who is my character? What are my error-handling routines? Am I going with the flow?