

Technical Presentations

(by Bill Mckeeman, DEC/Compaq)

A technical presentation, like a chain, is as strong as its weakest link. The links are confidence, context, content, structure, focus, delivery, visuals, handouts, humor, preparation...

Here are some guidelines. The first rule is:

There are no absolute rules. Use your head—do what works for you.

Ten Commandments

1. Know your audience
2. Know your material
3. Set the context
4. Use logical order
5. Size the talk to time
6. Use simple visuals
7. Use complex handouts
8. Make eye contact
9. Make ear contact
10. Prefer quality over quantity

Seven Deadly Sins

1. Stretching the truth
2. Being boring
3. Losing the audience
4. Putting ten pounds in a five-pound bag
5. Writing illegibly on the board
6. Speaking unintelligibly
7. Being arrogant

Ten Commandments

1. Know Your Audience

- Don't tell them things they already know
- Don't talk over their heads
- Avoid fancy vocabulary or jargon
- Minimize fancy mathematics
- Concentrate on useful information
- Provide relevant examples

2. Know Your Material

- You are the expert
- Know more than you plan to say
- Know the background and/or literature
- Reach for elegance

3. Set the Context

- Your background (Who I am)
- Purpose of the talk (Why I'm talking to you)
- Relevance of content to audience (Why you should care)
- Future directions

4. Use Logical Order

- No unnecessary forward references
- Keep chains of reasoning intact (don't skip any steps)
- Put examples near related material
- Choose breadth first *or* depth first
- Push interesting material forward

5. Size the Talk to Time

- Don't waste time (a talk to 50 techies costs \$2000/hour)
- Plan what to leave out
- Leave time for audience interaction
- Time a live dry run
- Plan at least 3 minutes per overhead

6. Use Simple Visuals

- Don't put a visual up unless the audience can read and understand it before you plan to take it down
- Use a large font size to promote readability
- Don't scribble on the blackboard—take time to be an artist
- Make sure the projector is working ahead of time
- Check spelling, etc.
- In a list, make sure that every point has the same grammatical form, e.g., all are commands, all are sentences, all are questions, or all are noun phrases

7. Use Complex Handouts

- Detailed notes or transcripts of your talk
- Relevant background papers
- Relevant program listings
- URLs or file locations
- Contact information

8. Make Eye contact

- It's a means of communication.
- It shows the audience that you are interested in them
- It tells you whether the audience is interested/bored/lost

9. Make Ear Contact

- Speak more slowly (than usual)
- Speak more clearly (than usual)—enunciate
- Project your voice
- Speak to everyone in the audience—don't talk to your feet or the wall
- Pause after completing a packet of information

10. Prefer Quality over Quantity

- Poorly presented material will be forgotten
- Leave something for your next presentation
- Imagine having to listen to your own talk

Seven Deadly Sins

1. Stretching the Truth

- A little BS ruins a good soup
- Someone may act on your information
- Clearly label predictions, opinions, guesses
- Practice saying "I don't know, do you?"

2. Being Boring

- Your presentation is a public performance
- Don't go too slow or too fast
- Don't give a talk full of sound and fury, signifying nothing

3. Losing the Audience

- Over their heads (slow down, back up)
- Beneath their interest (get on to better stuff)
- Left them behind over a too-big step
- Not enough relevant examples
- Eye contact is a way of detecting a lost audience

4. Putting Ten Pounds in a Five-Pound Bag

- Symptom: half done, 10 minutes to go
- Symptom: jerking down a half-read slide
- Motto: I shall return
- Disaster: you left the good stuff to last
- Fame: you get your hour in the sun—don't get sunburned

5. Writing Illegibly on the Board

- A good picture is worth a 1000 scribbles
- Most students copy in their notebooks only what is written on the blackboard

6. Speaking Unintelligibly

- Use English
- Be sure the audience can see your face
- Don't swallow words
- Don't swallow your ending
- Don't mumble
- Don't speak in monotone

7. Being Arrogant

- Are you interacting properly with the audience?
- Are you demeaning their questions?
- Are you acting insulted by their questions or comments?

Final Advice

Have a buddy score your dry run. A fresh set of eyes and ears is very valuable. If you break most commandments and commit most sins, reschedule your talk. If you break some commandments and commit some sins, do another dry run.