

# Skillbook

# Great Presentations

Communication  
Skills



**Mindtools**

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## Skillbook

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# 1. Introduction

**D**uring the course of your career, you'll likely have to deliver numerous presentations. They are a primary means of imparting knowledge to others, as well as selling ideas, products and services – and creating visibility for yourself.

Too many of us dread giving presentations. We let fear obscure the fact that they are good opportunities to impress our boss, our colleagues and our clients with our knowledge and skills.

You should seize these opportunities to advance your career, and the best way to do that is with thorough preparation. Good preparation consists of understanding the “mechanics” of presenting and practicing them until they become second nature.

In this one-hour **Skillbook**, you'll learn how to prepare and deliver presentations in the most efficient and effective way possible, by concentrating on four fundamental principles:

- **Principle 1:** Understand your audience.
- **Principle 2:** Prepare your content to meet your audience's needs and wants.
- **Principle 3:** Deliver your presentation with confidence.
- **Principle 4:** Control your environment for maximum effectiveness.

At the end of the Skillbook, you'll apply these principles to two fictional scenarios.

## 2. What Makes a Great Presentation?

**W**hen you give a great presentation, you accomplish an important goal: **you deliver a message with a positive and memorable impact.** Members of your audience leave knowing exactly what they need to know, and what they're expected to do about it.

However, the benefits of giving a great presentation extend beyond this. People will want to attend your future presentations, because they know it will be worth their while. Also, they'll view you as the "go to" person for accurate and essential information.

Of course, bad or mediocre presentations can have a negative impact on your career. We've all been in tedious meetings where the presenter monotonously describes their project in such excruciating detail that, by the end, you'd rather go to the dentist than sit through another one!

Similarly, you may have attended a presentation that's flashy and highly entertaining but, afterward, you couldn't remember what the point of the whole thing was. In either case, the impact on audience members is negative.

The good news is that it's not difficult to deliver great presentations: it just requires a commitment to **planning** and **practice**.

## 3. Principle 1: Understand Your Audience

**T**his is often the most neglected principle, and this neglect can lead to mediocre or poor presentations. When you are preparing your presentation, never forget your audience's needs and expectations.

When you know your audience, you can prepare content that specifically appeals to it. Here's an example that shows how different audiences' expectations of the same presentation can vary:

*A large corporation wanted to brief its staff on a new, high-performance material. Jim, a veteran chemical engineer, was asked to give one presentation to his fellow engineers and a second one to the company's salespeople.*

*The first presentation to the engineers was a huge success. Jim described the chemical properties and behavior of the material, and used a range of graphical forms to report a rich and detailed set of data regarding its tensile strength and flexibility. Buoyed by his success, Jim gave the same presentation to the salespeople, but it was a resounding flop.*

*Some salespeople began yawning. Others left the room to make calls. They felt that Jim's information was useless in terms of accomplishing their main objective – selling the new product to their clients.*

Jim had neglected the first principle of great presentations: understanding his audience's needs and wants. If he had done some basic research, he would have realized that the salespeople needed selling points (such as features and benefits) more than they needed detailed technical data.

He could have given the salespeople what they needed by analyzing the following four points:

### 1. Audience Profile

To get a profile of an audience, ask yourself these questions:

- **What describes the groups of people in your audience?**  
*In Jim's case above, he had two very different audiences – one technical and one sales-oriented.*
- **What common element unites each audience?**  
*The engineers wanted the detailed technical data on the new product, while the salespeople needed the more general information that would help them sell the new material.*

## 2. Audience Needs and Wants

Answer these questions to determine your audience's needs:

- **Why are people attending the presentation?**  
*The engineers attending Jim's presentation wanted to know how to make and mold the new material for different applications. The salespeople simply needed to know how to sell it.*
- **What do the audience members need to know after you've finished?**  
*The engineers needed technical data. The salespeople needed to know the new material's features and benefits.*
- **Do they want to increase their knowledge or be entertained?**  
*The engineers most likely wanted to increase their detailed product knowledge and learn something new. The salespeople wanted to increase their general knowledge of the product to understand how best to sell it.*
- **How can you connect their interests with your message?**  
*For Jim, it was easy to connect the engineers' technical interests with his message. For the salespeople, Jim needed to jettison much of the technical data in favor of sales points.*

## 3. Audience Expectations

Answer this question to determine your audience's expectations:

- **What do people expect in terms of content and length?**  
*The engineers wanted a thorough, detailed presentation in whatever time it took to get the job done. The salespeople wanted the presentation to be as short, effective and entertaining as possible.*

## 4. Audience Knowledge

Answer these questions to assess how much information you need to give your audience:

- **How much explaining do you need to do?**  
*Jim's engineer audience needed as much explanation as possible in order to work with the new product. The salespeople simply needed selected technical points, blended with selling points.*
- **What assumptions can you make?**  
*Jim had easy assumptions to make. One audience was technical, the other was focused on sales.*

## 4. Principle 2: Prepare Your Content



nce you have a good understanding of your audience, you need to prepare your presentation's content. Here are some tips for preparing effectively:

### Don't Try to Cover Everything

The writer and philosopher Voltaire said, "The secret of being a bore is to tell all." Great presentations stimulate thoughts, questions and discussion.

Consider how the information that you're presenting might apply to your audience. And be realistic about time – if you try to cram too much in, you'll be forced to rush, or you'll risk overrunning.

### Start With a Great Hook

You only have a few seconds at the start of your presentation to engage your audience, so don't waste this time on background information. Get people charged up and eager to listen, and make it obvious why your presentation is relevant.

Don't make them wait for your conclusion: tell them up front what your premise or purpose is. This helps people to stay focused. They may not agree with you at the start, but they'll be able to follow your arguments along the way.

### Prepare Short, Easy-to-Follow Points

Use chunking to deliver information in bite-sized pieces. Breaking down your information into manageable units makes it easier for your audience to comprehend and retain what they're hearing.

### Present Your Ideas Logically, With Supporting Evidence

People need to be able to follow the flow of your presentation. The clearer you can make it, the better they'll be able to understand your message.

## Highlight Any Actions That Are Required

Your audience should leave the presentation with a clear idea of their individual assignments and responsibilities, if appropriate. So prepare an outline of actions or steps that you expect people to take after the presentation.

## Develop a Strong Close, Including a Summary

People are only able to absorb and remember a certain amount of information at a time. Close with a strong message and summary, and repeat your main points. To keep the topic fresh in people's minds, consider ending with a question designed to stimulate further discussion.



## 5. Principle 3: Deliver With Confidence

**C**onfidence comes from practice. It's as simple as that. When you are totally familiar with your content, your visual aids and your delivery, you can make a great presentation to an appreciative audience. This chapter will focus on how you can deliver a presentation with confidence by using affirmations, visual aids, and brushing up your delivery, and style.

### Affirmations

We can be our own worst enemy when it comes to confidence. Many of us undermine our self-confidence with negative, self-sabotaging thoughts.

To combat this, use positive affirmations to reinforce your sense of self-worth. Create personal affirmation statements to banish the negativity and remind yourself of how much you've achieved and what you are capable of. This can help to give you that confidence boost you need to get up on stage.

### Visual Aids

Most presenters use visual aids (such as PowerPoint®, Google Slides®, or simple flip charts). They keep the audience focused and help to communicate your message. They can also boost your confidence as an authoritative, professional speaker.

There are many popular and powerful presentation software apps you can use. It can be easy to get lost in the flashy features on offer so take care not to distract your audience with so much glitz that you fail to get your message across.

When designing a presentation with visual aids, keep the following in mind:

- Keep slides or graphics simple and easy to understand.
- The information on the slide should always add value to your presentation. Remember, it's not meant to **be** your presentation, it's just there as an **aid**.
- Use images sparingly. Make sure that they mean something, and aren't just there to fill up space.
- Use pleasant color schemes and simple fonts. Use bold and italic fonts to add emphasis to words.

- Use tables, columns, pictures, and other visuals to aid understanding.
- Don't use fly-ins, fade-outs, or other animations unless it's absolutely necessary to emphasize a point. How many times have you been put into a hypnotic state watching words or lines fly by during a presentation?

With these principles in mind, you're ready to create your visual aids. When writing **text** for your slides, follow these guidelines:

- Keep paragraphs short – start a new paragraph for each new point.
- Use titles to introduce new concepts.
- Start with the overall concept and then move on to the details.
- Try to limit lists and bullet points to no more than five short items.
- When giving instructions, be very specific, and separate each step as appropriate.
- Never use your visual aids as your script. Too often, tiny notes are squeezed onto a slide, with no added value for the audience.

Always remember what visual aids are for – they are there to **support** your presentation. Don't let them **become** your presentation.

## Delivery and Style

When you present with confidence you gain authority – and your audience pays attention.

The way you deliver your content can make or break a presentation. A droning, monotone voice and stiff posture can put your audience to sleep, whereas a dynamic, enthusiastic delivery draws the audience in.

Becoming an effective presenter requires practice and attention to the following guidelines:

- Try not to use your hands too much or move about carelessly – only use gestures for meaning, not comfort.
- Pause for effect after main points, or when you reveal a new visual aid.
- Step out from behind the podium. Clinging to the podium signals nervousness or uncertainty.
- Talk loud enough for everyone to hear you, or use a microphone if you can't.
- Make eye contact with individuals, and hold it for three to five seconds. Any less, and it looks like you are merely scanning the crowd.
- Don't talk to your slides. Always face your audience.
- Be passionate – show your audience that you care about what you're saying. A genuine love of a subject can be contagious for an audience.
- Consider putting up a blank or low-content screen at various stages of your presentation. This puts the attention to where it should be – on you!
- Change your pace and style from time to time.
- Be natural – don't try to be a comedian if you're not.

The ultimate goal is to deliver your presentation without notes.

If this is not possible, at least be sure that you're comfortable with the material, and that nothing will come as a surprise.

The only way you can do this is to rehearse what you are going to say, time and again. It's critical that you take the time to hone your presentation and become confident and comfortable with your content.

The goal is to make the presentation look effortless. If you struggle in your delivery, it makes the audience focus on you and not on what you are saying.



## 6. Principle 4: Control Your Environment

**Y**ou can't eliminate every problem that might occur during a presentation.

But, with diligent planning and preparation, you can reduce the chances of these problems happening, and cope with them if they do. Here are some tips for taking and maintaining control:

### Consider Time and Place

Think about where and when you are giving your presentation. The following checklist has some suggestions for what you should consider:

- **Always be early.** You need time to deal with any unexpected issues before people arrive.
- **Think about where your audience members are.** If they're calling in from different time zones, make sure you chose the most appropriate time for all parties.
- **Find out in advance what the dress code will be.** For example, for an internal presentation, casual clothing may be appropriate. However, in an external presentation to company prospects or clients, more formal clothing may be expected.
- **Finish on time.** Last impressions are just as important as first ones, and people will appreciate it if your presentation ends on time. They might have other places to go or meetings to attend, especially if they've phoned in or are linking up virtually.

### Prepare the Space

Things can and will go wrong, so you should plan for as many contingencies as possible.

- Test everything exactly as you'll be using it before you begin.
- Pick the right equipment for the environment. For example, if you have a large room, make sure your slides are big enough for everyone to see.
- Check with the venue whether they have all the necessary technology. You might need to bring adapters or specific cables with you.
- Be familiar with the tools that you'll be using and how they will function in the space. For example, are there enough power outlets? Is there a good WiFi connection? Always allow time to check your technology before starting.

- If there's a camera, is it well positioned? Can your audience see what they need to see?
- Keep the lights on. When you darken the room, the screen might stand out, but you won't. It might also send some of the audience to sleep, which you want to avoid at all costs!

## Prepare Your Audience

Think about your audience. Who are they? Where are they? And why are they there?

Some audience members may have “phoned in,” or you may have an entirely virtual audience. Either way, you need to make sure that your audience has everything it needs.

Here are some things to consider for your virtual attendees:

- Choose the appropriate platform. For example, if you want your audience to interact, make sure your chosen technology allows for two-way communication.
- Make sure your audience members have everything they need in advance. Do they need to download new software to access the presentation? Do they know in advance what to expect from your presentation?
- Often, virtual attendees feel isolated and can “switch off” or get distracted. Consider ways to keep them engaged – could you have breakout rooms, for example, design a virtual quiz or include a Q&A section to encourage audience participation and discussion?

## 7. Scenarios

In this chapter, we look at two scenarios, where presentations didn't go as well as expected. As you read through each scenario, think about how **you** would do things differently. Make notes of your observations and answer the questions at the end.

### Scenario 1: Lakshay's New Product Presentation

Lakshay has been given 30 minutes in a day-long program to introduce the company's new "Impact 9000" (or "i9000") product to staff.

The purpose of the presentation is to give a general, company-wide introduction to the i9000. The ultimate goal is to create excitement for the product, and to get everyone "up to speed," so they can spread the word to prospects and customers intelligently and enthusiastically.

The audience is a mixture of managers, administrative personnel, salespeople, and plant personnel.

Lakshay uses slides to illustrate the product's features, benefits and technical specifications. He's prepared thoroughly for this presentation and has a slide for every one of the i9000's impressive technical features. He spends about 30 minutes of the meeting on these features alone. During most of the presentation, he averages one detailed slide every 60 seconds.

40 minutes after he started, Lakshay gets a polite reception from his audience. He's disappointed because he'd expected a more wholehearted response. In fact, he sees a few stifled yawns and glazed-over eyes. He also notices that the next presenter is not happy with him.

**Question 1: What do you think went wrong?**

**Question 2: How could Lakshay have managed the presentation differently?**

## Scenario 2: Alessandra's Sales Presentation

Alessandra prides herself on her ability to master new skills and knowledge quickly. She's been asked by her manager to make her very first sales presentation to Samir Rashid, an executive with an agricultural equipment manufacturer.

She's spoken over the phone with Samir, and has the impression that he's down-to-earth and plain-spoken. He told her that he grew up on a farm and farmed for years before coming to work for the agricultural equipment company.

Because she's so busy and feels she can carry the presentation with ease, Alessandra doesn't practice, and she waits until the day before the meeting to prepare her materials.

Alessandra and her manager meet with Samir the next morning, and she begins the presentation. The slides are slick, well-produced, and full of great animated imagery, charts and graphs. As far as Alessandra is concerned, the presentation is highly professional, and she knows Samir will be impressed by it.

She speaks rapidly and confidently at first. But then Samir starts asking questions and interrupting the flow. She cannot answer some of the questions, and this causes her to lose her train of thought.

She quickly draws his attention away from the questions and back to the slides. However, he politely insists on asking more questions. She can't answer these questions either, and she is dismayed to see her manager take over the presentation.

By the end of the meeting, she can see that both Samir and her manager are unimpressed with her efforts.

**Question 1: Which principles of great presentations did Alessandra ignore?**

**Question 2: How could Alessandra have impressed Samir?**

## 8. Scenarios: Suggested Solutions

### Scenario 1: Suggested Solution

**What do you think went wrong? How could Lakshay have managed the presentation differently?**

Lakshay would have received the enthusiastic response he expected if he'd remembered two things: the objectives of the meeting and the profile of his audience.

One objective was to generate enthusiasm for the Impact 9000. He lost any chance of generating that enthusiasm by spending too much time on the technical features.

He also overwhelmed the audience with too many detailed slides (about one per minute). To his largely non-technical audience, it felt like the information was zooming past, and they didn't have time to absorb it. A purely technical audience would probably have loved his presentation, but Lakshay was presenting to a general audience that needed only a broad picture of the Impact 9000.

What's more, he should have emphasized the product's features and benefits, rather than its technical specifications. A general audience understands these aspects and can explain to prospects and customers that the Impact 9000 offers them substantial benefits, such as saving money, making money, saving time, or reducing errors.

Finally, in his eagerness to explain the product, Lakshay ran 10 minutes over his allotted time. That meant that his audience lost interest, and he irritated the next presenter.

### Scenario 2: Suggested Solution

**Which principles of great presentations did Alessandra ignore? How could Alessandra have impressed Samir?**

Most importantly, Alessandra was overconfident and failed to practice her presentation! She waited until the day before the meeting to do any substantial work on it, when she should have run through it with co-workers several times to work out any bugs.

Second, as part of her preparation, she should have learned more about the needs and products of the agricultural equipment company. She was unable to answer Samir's questions.

To Samir, this indicated three things. First, Alessandra had failed to do her homework on his company and, therefore, would not do good work for him.

Second, she demonstrated that she didn't feel that Samir and his company were important enough to warrant thorough preparation.

Third, Alessandra forgot what she'd learned over the phone – that Samir was a plain-spoken man with a farming background. He didn't care about the slickness of her visuals; he wanted information that went straight to the point.

In effect, by the end of the presentation, he thought Alessandra was talking down to him, and therefore saw no reason to pay money to her company.

For her next presentation, Alessandra needs do her homework on the client's products, design the presentation to meet the needs of her audience, and, above all, practice her presentation several times in the days before meeting the client.

## 9. Key Points

**D**elivering a presentation needn't be the nerve-wracking experience that so many of us dread. If you grab the opportunity with both hands, and approach it with a positive outlook, you could turn an anxious challenge into a real career boost.

This Skillbook looked at the key points to consider to help you deliver a confident, informative and well-received presentation.

Each time you give a presentation, apply these four principles at every stage of developing your content:

- **Principle 1:** Understand your audience.
- **Principle 2:** Prepare your content to meet your audience's needs and wants.
- **Principle 3:** Deliver a practiced presentation, with confidence.
- **Principle 4:** Control your environment for maximum effectiveness.

Now, to take your presentation skills to the next level, read the second **Skillbook** in this series, Even Better Presentations.