

1. introduction

There are many books that offer advice on how to present. Nowadays, there is also a considerable amount of advice on the Internet. Why would I want to add to that?

None of that advice is, as far as I can tell, specific to the knowledge professions, where ideas derived from research and design dominate discussion. Most advice on presentations focuses on sales and marketing where the emphasis is on persuading and motivating. It is not that this advice fails to cover anything of use to the knowledge professions but rather, that it does not cover all aspects of presenting within the knowledge professions where we wish to inform and explain.

Possibly most troubling of all, much of the advice now offered in books and on the Internet implies that presenting is more about style than substance. Within the knowledge professions, substance is crucial. We should never choose style over substance. However, we do not need to make that choice. A high quality knowledge presentation will offer the substance of solid ideas within the style of an engaging format.

A magic key?

Throughout the years I struggled with my presentation style, I imagined there was a magic key. All I had to do was find it and I would become excellent overnight. To my mind, the magic key had something to do with style. I had meaningful and interesting things to say. The right style would solve my problems.

I sought advice and assistance where I could; all the *right* places. While teaching at the University of Illinois, I sought the assistance of the Office of Instruction and Management. I received much advice on organization and planning. None of it helped. I was already organized and I already engaged in detailed planning.

I now realize that *almost* no-one, not even the professionals who are supposed to know how to do this, know how to help someone who is struggling. Most of the advice I received sounded sensible but it did not address my problem.

In retrospect, I now see that some of the advice I received led me in the wrong direction. At one stage, I was advised that I needed to be more entertaining. This is the sort of glib (and counter-productive) advice you will get from those who have not thought the problem through. Within the knowledge professions, we are not entertainers. While elements that entertain as they make a relevant point are fine, you will distract your audience from your argument if you consciously try to entertain throughout your presentation. As a knowledge professional, what you have to offer is intrinsically interesting. You should be able to engage your audience with that.

It's not magic!

As I note in the foreword to this book, I did find a key, but it was not a *magic* key. It was quite straightforward. I needed to start with a certain type of structured outline, one that highlighted the relationship between my key points.

While that structured outline remains fundamental to how I now develop a presentation, I have continued to refine my presentation style by taking careful note of what works and what does not work when I present. Except where I note otherwise, the strategies I introduce throughout this book are those that have worked for me. I once took seriously much of the advice I found in books and on the internet. More often than not, I found that those strategies did not work for me and some even detracted from my presentations. I mention that here not to dissuade you from trying those strategies but to alert you to the need to continually assess what is working for you and what is not.

There is no science of presentations!

In planning this book, I had intended to align my ideas with peer-reviewed research. Nevertheless, I had limited success with that. The implications of the relevant science for how to go about presenting are not always clear or sufficiently succinct. As with advice from books and the internet, I have almost always had to rely on my own reflection and observation to assess whether any particular strategy is likely to enhance my presentation or detract from it. I do reflect on ideas from cognitive science and other scholarly writings where I find something relevant, but what I have found does not offer a comprehensive perspective. In addition, while it is often thought provoking, it is rarely conclusive. Again, even where scientific knowledge is involved, I rely mostly on what I have found works for me.



Not just a matter of hard work!

There is a notion within cognitive science that it takes 10,000 hours of experience to develop expertise. This rather glib idea ignores the fact that experience, by itself, is of limited value. You need to approach what you do mindfully (that is, attend to the details and the challenges) and you need to apply the right sort of strategies.

I assume you are already working hard at your presentations. However, you will not improve if you keep making the same mistakes.

Why this book?

Most conference presentations are terrible but inevitably there will be a small number of good presenters at any conference. Early in my career, I thought to take note of what the best presenters did and to model myself after them. That did not work for me. On reflection, I now realise that most of those presenters I was trying to use as a model were far more outgoing than I am. They were naturals at this. They were comfortable on stage and they behaved in ways that were foreign to me. Furthermore, the more effective presenters were so different to each other that I was unable to abstract the essentials. I could not identify common principles or strategies that I could use as a framework to develop an effective style for myself.

The journey I have taken to arrive at a better place has been arduous and often distressing. It has, however, led to a strategy that works for me. I like to think it will also work for you. My primary aim is to show you how you can develop and then deliver an effective presentation, one that goes well beyond your current standard. On the way, I will puncture some myths. More importantly, I will tell you what works and what does not work. If this book serves you as I intend, it will help you move to a better place without the false directions and frustrations that plagued my journey.



Moving on

Now, how might you transform yourself from an ordinary, possibly even dismal presenter, into an excellent one? Let's start on that process.