

Don't get thrown out of your next sales presentation

Your audience's time is very valuable. Here's how to make the most of it.

Imagine for a moment you're the President/CEO of a major corporation. (Yes, you get the stock options too) Your time is at a premium these days and you seldom grant it to anyone - especially sales people. You've made an exception this time, however, because of a compelling ad in an in-flight magazine and a web site that was pretty impressive. In your estimation, this was clearly a leading-edge company with a crisp product message augmented by graphics that packed a visually descriptive punch. This company was clearly worth another look.

Now, at your request, their senior sales person has arrived at your office. (He's pretty pumped because it took 2 months to finally get the appointment) As you watch him set up for the presentation you notice he's come in with a laptop computer and an electronic projector. Very impressive... but he seems to having some problems. The sales person laughs nervously as he tries to reconcile a 1024x768 laptop image into an aging 800x600 electronic projector the size of New Jersey. "I had to borrow this from our training group", he muses. He finally gives up, satisfied with a projected image that's dropping lines everywhere making his projected computer desktop look like it went through a cheese grater. Smaller text was breaking up and distracting "jaggies" were everywhere. With a confident double-click he now launches his PowerPoint presentation. At this point, 8 minutes of his allotted 30 have elapsed and you suspect you're going to be hard pressed to make your 3 o'clock tee time unless this clown gets this thing cranked up real soon.

The PowerPoint presentation fills the screen and with a big grin on his face, he introduces himself and his company. The "warm-up" banter fades as you take a hard look at the presentation graphics on screen. Gone is the finely honed corporate identity you saw in the ad and on their web site. The crisp descriptive copy you read before has now been replaced with an unending barrage of bullet text and, to make things worse, they're flying in from every direction while making bizarre sounds as they go. (Barnum and Bailey have nothing on this guy. All you need now is the smell of freshly spun cotton candy to complete the ambiance.

It's now 15 minutes into his well-rehearsed presentation and you're still waiting for him to take his first breath. You know everything about his company but unfortunately he still knows nothing about yours. In an effort to tell you everything he felt was important for you to know, he forgot about something pretty important... you. Think of it this way. Imagine you've just been slapped with a lawsuit and you're visiting your attorney for help. While you're trying to describe your predicament, she continually stops you in mid-sentence to draw your attention to the diplomas on the wall and an impressive list of clients they've had over the years. By this time I'm guessing you could care less about that stuff. All you're concerned with is losing the vacation cottage in Malibu. With your business presentations, you may be enamored with your product or service but you had better establish relevance with your prospect early on or your chances of closing this deal will go south in a big hurry.

I can't tell you this little story has a very happy ending. The sales person gets thrown out for wasting your time, you're still looking for someone who will ask you questions about your business and to make things even worse, you missed your 3 o'clock tee time! As I've consulted with companies over the years, most have fallen into these or similar traps. The stakes are too high for using hastily conceived presentations. In the end analysis, it's all about closing the deal, not feeling good because you made the presentation yourself. If you're in sales and marketing, you can ill-afford not to take the following advice to heart.

- Treat your presentation template with the same consideration you would your print advertising. Leverage your existing marketing communication identity so it extends into your presentation graphics creating a consistent, professional look.
- Create your message specifically for your presentation medium. It's unique and it's as personal as it gets. Having your desktop publishing person make your presentations simply won't fly.
- In a consultative sales call, use specific slides (screens) in the presentation to ask questions of your prospective client and if your sharp enough, jump out of PowerPoint's Slide Show mode and capture their

feedback live into the slide. For example, "What are your 3 most significant IT challenges today? By this time next year?" Listen, capture comments and feed it back to them for validation.

- If you do this well, then your service (or product) descriptions can be focused at specific uncovered needs not simply thrown against the wall to see what sticks.
- Spend time with your best sales person to understand how they tell your story. Building those elements into a professionally crafted presentation will help your less experienced sales people become more effective in less time, which means stronger revenue contribution.

Maybe you're not the CEO but I'm guessing your compensation plan is set up to reward you for making positive impressions on prospective clients and closing them to business. Maybe it's time to take a fresh look at the most personal & influential of all business communication tools... your presentation.

How to open your presentations

Your most listened-to sentence is your first sentence - so your opening deserves careful preparation.

You are an unknown quantity for only 120 seconds. After that everything you say will be heard in the context of the impression from your first two minutes. Your most listened-to sentence is your first sentence. Therefore, your opening deserves careful preparation and your very best thinking.

In the first 120 seconds you must:

- Capture their attention and interest
- Answer the question "What's in it for me?"

The audience must understand a selfish reason to pay attention to what you have to say.

If you cannot articulate a selfish reason for the audience to pay attention to what you have to say, then you have nothing to say to this audience.

The best example I have ever heard of someone explaining to me why it was in my best interest to pay attention happened in Texas.

I was going through jet fighter pilot training. Before they strap the stove pipe on you, you have to go to ground school to learn the electrical system, the fuel system, and so on. One day the instructor walked into class and held up a red ribbon with a pin at the end. He said, "Gentlemen, do you know what this is?" Well, of course we didn't know what it was.

He explained that this was the safety pin from the ejection seat of an F- Sabre jet, and that for the next hour he was going to lecture to us on how to eject from an F-86 Sabre jet and survive. Then when we finished the lecture we were going out that door to the parade grounds where there was an actual ejection seat mounted on a vertical railroad track. And, one at a time we were each going to be strapped into that seat. We would pull down our visors, pull up the left arm rest, pull up the right arm rest, then pull the trigger underneath the right arm rest-and when we did, a live 20 millimeter cannon shell was going to explode under our you-know-what, and we were going to be shot straight up.

Do you think he had our attention? Let me tell you, every man in that room could have given that lecture. That instructor had explained very well a selfish reason for us to pay attention to what he had to say.

So early in the opening be sure you answer these kinds of questions.

Why are we here?

Why is it important?

What's in it for me?

How can I use it?

What will I get out of it?

People will pay attention and listen to what you have to say if they can see an advantage to themselves. The advantages can take many forms:

Material gain

Management approval

Prestige Self-advancement

Imitation of others

Social approval

Self-satisfaction

Sense of accomplishment

Peace of mind Satisfy curiosity

Here are some ideas for attention-getting openings.

- Ask a provocative question

"How many of you own a foreign car, camera, or watch?"

- Use a quote that relates to your subject

"The best way to help the poor is not to be one of them."

"The duration of the marriage is inversely proportional to the cost of the wedding."

- State a startling fact or statistic

- Appeal to human interest

- Tell a story or personal experience that relates to your subject. A side benefit of telling a story is its value in overcoming nervousness in the first two minutes. You will be the most natural, the most animated, and speak with the greatest conviction and enthusiasm when you are relating a personal experience.

- Refer to a recent, well known event or local newsworthy story and bring the local paper with you. -Pay a sincere compliment to the audience's organization, their company, their profession, etc. And if you can relate something in your background to the common denominator that brings them together, you will get a double-whammy benefit of -I am one of you and we're all in this together."

The seven deadly sins

Here are seven guaranteed ways to give a dull, dry, and boring presentation. I learned them from IBM executives.

SIN #1 Show an Organization Chart, Tell the History of Your Department, and Apologize in Advance.

It happens all the time. Here come the hot-shots flying in from the home office to make a presentation to the locals. Through some misguided sense of direction they feel compelled to show you, as the very first thing, an organizational chart of their department and where it fits into the grand scheme of things back at Headquarters.

Then their keen sensitivity tells them that you are just dying to know the details of the history of their department back through the last three reorganizations.

Finally, just so you will understand that they're not incompetent (just busy), they will apologize for the out-of-date material, the small print that you can't read, the spelling errors, running over time, and the fact that they have to leave to catch a plane.

The irony of all this is that they think they're giving a good presentation and telling you just what you want to know.

In fact, the people most interested in an organization chart are the people who are on the organization chart. And the only people who are interested in the history of a department are the people in the department-and half of them aren't interested. As for all the apologizing, I sometimes would like to say to them, "Instead of apologizing for the way it is, explain to me why you haven't corrected it." I betcha that would get it fixed real quick!

SIN #2 Do Not Explain Any Reason Why the Subject Has Any Value to the Audience.

If you cannot articulate a reason for the audience to pay attention to what you have to say, then you have nothing to say to the audience. And that's the Problem. Many presentations are put together for a mass audience, with no tailoring and no spice, to present material that's of great interest to the Presenter, but of little interest to the audience.

Here's the acid test. How many people do you think would show up if you charged them ten bucks a head to get in to hear what you have to say?

SIN #3 Use a Presentation Designed for One Audience-for a Different Audience.

This is my all-time favorite sin. You can spot this sin in the first 60 seconds. These presenters usually start their presentations with-guess what?-an organization chart. Their purpose was to update Headquarters' management on the wonderful job their department is doing. That same presentation is then delivered to the troops in the field. Do you think they care?

Another example is the use of an internal presentation of a new product as a sales presentation to prospects. Do you think the position of a product within a product line has anything to do with why a prospect should buy it?

SIN #4 Tell the Audience More Than They Want to Know.

This sin is worse than just boring an audience-It is self-defeating. I would guess that over 90% of all presentations could be given in less time and more effectively. And often in substantially less time. Let's look at it this way. You have heard hundreds of presentations. Have you ever sat through a presentation and at the end of it heard anyone say, "It was a great presentation, but it was too short." No. People are more likely to say that it was terrible and too long. After all, the Biblical story of creation is only 600 words long. And if CBS can tell us the world news in just 30 minutes, maybe we can tell our story in less time than we think. Voltaire said, "The secret of being a bore is to tell everything."

A presentation is like a wheel. The longer the spoke, the bigger the tire.

SIN #5 Turn the Lights Out and Show Slides or Transparencies While Reading a Script.

How many presentations like this have you had to sit through? And what if it's right after lunch? And what about that script? Do you think the person reading it is the person who wrote it? (Or was it an English major from Berkeley?) And don't you feel sorry for them when they get out of sync and the words are one step ahead or behind the Slides? And what about the dose? When the lights come on, the audience en masse will blink their eyes, shake their heads, yawn, and stretch. What drama.

SIN #6 Read Verbatim Every Word on Every Visual.

If your entire presentation consists of nothing but reading verbatim every word on every visual, then the audience can with good reason say, I don't have to come to your meeting. Just mail me a copy of the handout. I can read." 'Nuff said.

SIN #7 Do Not Rehearse-Play It by Ear.

If there ever was a guaranteed formula for failure, this is it.

If you want to stumble, fumble, and sing off key, this is a sure way to do it. If that doesn't bother you, think of the audience. They deserve something better than an amateur reading a script, or trying to think up what he or she is going to say on the audience's time.

What is it that makes you think you can get by with what the pros would never try: performance without practice?

There is no fast-food line to giving a good presentation. Presenting is easy to learn but hard to do. As with most endeavors, you have to pay your dues. And that means rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.

If you can plead "not guilty" to the Seven Deadly Sins, you will be on your way to a winning performance. But to get the applause you deserve please don't get a ticket for any of the twelve most common mistakes.

1. Poor 1st impression
2. No objectives
3. Dull, dry, and boring
4. Frozen in one spot
5. Weak eye contact
6. Poor facial expression
7. No humor
8. Poor preparation
9. No audience involvement
10. No enthusiasm/conviction
11. Poor visual aids
12. Weak close

Design the close first

The most important part of the presentation is the close. It is at the close where you either accomplish your objective, or you don't.

Great is the art of beginning, but greater the art is of ending.
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The most important part of the presentation is the close. It is at the close where you either accomplish your objective, or you don't. Do they believe? Do they agree? Will they commit? Will they act? Will they order? The answers to these questions tell you how well you accomplished your objective. The objective is a statement at the beginning-the audience gives you their answer at the end.

You have only one chance at a professional close. So important is the close, that we plan it and design it from the very beginning. We want the objective and the close to dictate the contents of the entire presentation.

Remember when we were kids how we would focus the sun's rays with a magnifying glass onto a piece of paper, and burn a hole in it? Same with our presentation. Everything we say and do in the opening and the body should complement, concentrate, and focus on our close. This will provide singleness of purpose and keep our eyes on the target. The contents of the close will dictate the contents of the body. We begin a presentation where the audience is, but we close the presentation with where we want them to be. The close is our destination.

Let's look at it from the audience's point of view. It is at the close where they hear what they came to hear. Everything up to now has been in support of the close. We have been making our case, providing the evidence, and proving our points. Now we are ready to deliver the package, gift wrapped, with a red bow.

We want to use the trial lawyer's technique called the doctrine of primacy and recency. The doctrine of primacy says lead off with your strongest statement. The recency argument says finish with your biggest blast.

They will remember best what they hear last. So when it's all over and the people are leaving, what is it that you want them to have in their heads?

This technique is the same as that used by some writers of mystery novels. They conceive the ending first, then work backward to develop the rest of the story.

You might think the close is obvious and easy. I suggest to you that this is not the case. The secret is to leave the audience wishing for more, while at the same time feeling good because they got more than they expected.

You should write out the last two minutes of the presentation, and then do what the pros do-memorize it. That's right, memorize it. (What are you doing that is more important than giving this audience the very best you've got to give?) If you had just two minutes to tell someone the bottom line of your entire presentation, what would you say? That requires some planning and heavy thinking. Your entire presentation is no better than the close. So do it right. Take a tip from Broadway-the best song is the last song. Have them leaving in your song.

When you write out your close, be sure you write it the way you talk, and not the way you write. It has to sound like you-not like Hemingway.

There are two other reasons for having a well thought out, written, memorized, and rehearsed close. The day will come (usually soon) when you will either not have enough time or will run out of time. When that happens, you can just skip to the close. Usually the audience will not even be aware that you have left out some of the presentation.

The second reason is that the day will come when someone important will say to you, "For heavens sake, if you have something important to tell me, start at the end." You'll be ready. Give them your two-minute close.

The worst possible close is one that just peters out and sinks into the sunset with the comment, "Well, that's about all I have folks. Are there any questions?"

How many times have you sat through a presentation and, when it was all over, wondered what the main message was?

What about questions at the end? The problem is, this is the high point of your entire presentation-this is the climax. If you now enter into a prolonged Q-&-A period, you will detract from your close, bore most of the audience, and quickly lose the enthusiasm of the group. Moreover, it's completely unnecessary. If you plan a Q-&-A as part of the presentation, there will be no questions at the close. They will all have been answered. For now, let's remember that the time to not only answer questions, but also ask questions, is during the presentation, not at the end of the presentation.

In summary, the good news is this: If you have a strong opening and dynamite close, the stuff in the middle can be mediocre and you will still have a good presentation.

How to close your presentation

Learn different techniques of closing your presentation - including the "Funnel Close," the "Iceberg Close" and more.

Here is an example of an approach that we might call the Happy Ending Close.

Let's suppose that we are selling or promoting a product or service that I will call "X" We structure the presentation so that in the opening we present:

- The characteristics of an ideal "X" or
- The criteria for selecting the best "X" or
- The functions of a comprehensive "X"

In the body, we talk about the functions, features, benefits, and advantages of our "X."

Then in the close we summarize the strengths of our "X."

Guess what? Our strengths turn out to be exactly the same as:

- The characteristics of an ideal "X" or
- The criteria for selecting the best or "X" or
- The functions of a comprehensive "X."

The key to the Happy Ending Close is to design the close first. Having done that, you back up to the opening and structure it to be exactly compatible with what you now know the close will be. Or simply put, the close provides the perfect answers to the questions raised in the opening. The only way you can make that happen is to design the close first. If you don't you may raise questions in the opening for which you have weak answers, or no answers in the close.

If you use this approach properly then you can ask for and get the audience's agreement on key points in the Opening. If they agree with the opening, then the close becomes a "gotcha."

THE OPENING

Present in concept the characteristics,
the criteria or the functions of the ideal,
best or most comprehensive "X"

THE BODY

Present functions, features, benefits,
and advantages of "X".

THE CLOSE

Summarize strengths and show them to be the same as:

- the characteristics of an Idea "X".
- or the-criteria for selecting the best "X".
- or the-functions of a comprehensive "X"

THE FUNNEL CLOSE

Here's another approach. Let's suppose you have a total of 15 key points in your presentation. The day after the presentation, how many of the key points do you think people will remember? That's right. Not very many.

Maybe three or four. And they may not be the three or four we would prefer them to remember. After all, he who emphasizes everything, emphasizes nothing.

Suppose we approach the subject another way. Let's start with the day after and make the assumption that they will remember three things. If that's the case then what are the three things we would like them to remember? These will be the three things our close will focus on.

Suppose we conclude that the three things we would like the audience to remember is that our product or service is:

1. Comprehensive
2. Easy to use
3. Easy to maintain

Now we can design the close around these three central thoughts. We classify each of the 15 key points within the three central thoughts.

THE ICEBERG CLOSE

Having established the close, we can now back into the opening and the body to provide a logical structure and flow to the presentation.

What we have done is to categorize 15 independent key points into three summary conclusions that we want the audience to remember.

The point of this structure is that even though people will not remember the 15 supporting key ideas, they will remember that the proof of each of the three central thoughts was convincing, and at the time they heard it they understood and agreed with it.

So even though they forget the details, they will remember the three truths you want them to retain. And it doesn't matter whether the subject is a computer, an investment program, or a lawn mower.

THE SHOTGUN CLOSE

Well, you say, that sure makes a lot of sense. I like the structure, the flow, and the logic. However, the nature of my presentation doesn't lend itself to that structure. I have many key points to make and they aren't well related, so they don't fit into your funnels. In fact, they are almost the opposite of a funnel-they are more like a Shotgun.

Suppose for example, you are in personnel or training. Your job is to give a company orientation presentation to new employees. You have 20 unrelated key points to present.

How in the world are you going to get them to remember 20 key points? Here's how you do it. We call it the Shotgun Close.

HOW GOOD IS YOUR INVESTMENT IQ? True or False

1. T F Out of every 100 people, 26% are flat broke at age 65.
2. T F 40% of all people living in poverty are women.
3. T F The cheapest way to borrow money is to use the method that will discount interest.
4. T F Baron de Rothchild said, "Common stocks are the 8th wonder of the world."
5. T F The technical method of forecasting future stock movement is correct only 75% of the time.
6. T F Persistent pattern in the stock market occur as frequently as 75% of the time.
7. T F The greater the risk - the lower the commissions a stockbroker gets.
8. T F 70% of all stockbrokers own mostly over-the-counter stocks - not Blue Chips.
9. T F 10% of all people who invest in the stock market over 10 years do not make money.
10. T F Of the Forbes 400 richest 400 women in America, over one half
11. T F Mark Twain said, "July is the most dangerous month to speculate in stocks."

12. T F Stocks recommended on Wall Street Week have typically outperformed the market average by 5-10% within the next two months.
13. T F The five year performance of mutual funds has been significantly greater than the market average.
14. T F The size and scope of the large institutional investor gives them a significant advantage over the individual investor.
15. T F If you had followed Howard Ruff's advice over the last five years, you would have had an average annual return of 24%.
16. T F Professional investment advice has been wrong 25% of the time.
17. T F There are more millionaires per capita in Maine than any other state.
18. T F Solid investment advice for the last 20 years would have been to buy good stocks and hold on to them.
19. T F Over the last five years you would have done better in Old Master Paintings than anything else.
20. T F You can defer taxes-but never avoid them.

The secrets to success of the Shotgun Close are:

1. Repetition
2. Verbal participation
3. Written participation

We design the close to be in the form of a verbal test that we all take together. The test consists of multiple questions-one for each key point.

Again, having now designed the dose, we can back up to the opening and the body.

This approach is not only different, it is also stimulating, interesting, and is the best way for an audience to remember a large number of points.

You should think through each question carefully to make it interesting and provocative. Also, provide space on the handout for the audience to write down the correct answers.

This technique uses the wisdom of K'ung Futzu from 479 B.C. (his English name is Confucius):

- They hear it.
- They see it-if you have proper visual aids.
- They do it-by the act of writing the correct answer.

Built into the structure of the presentation is:

1. Repetition
 - a. Seen at the beginning
 - b. Elaborated on during the presentation
 - c. Reviewed at the dose
2. Participation
 - a. Each individual takes the test during the opening.
 - b. The answers are written on the handout as they are covered in the presentation.
 - c. The group retakes the test verbally during the close.

They won't remember the 20 questions. But any time one of the 20 questions is asked, they will remember the answer.

By the way, the answer to all 20 questions is False.

THE JIGSAW PUZZLE CLOSE

Next we have a close called the Jigsaw Puzzle Close.

The idea is that we define a major problem, then break the problem down into its component parts (the seven pieces of the puzzle). We then provide a solution (X, Y, or Z) for each component part of the problem.

The purpose of the close is to show that all component parts of the problem are solved by our recommendation of X, Y, and Z.

PREDICTIONS OF THE FUTURE CLOSE

Here is a popular dose. You almost can't lose with this one. You simply predict what's going to happen in the future.

People like good news. If you are predicting the future, you can make the news as good as you want. And the farther out the prediction, the more plausible it may seem. Also, this type of dose gives you an aura of wisdom and insight that is rare among mortal beings.

If our close is Predictions of the Future, then we can back up to the opening and the body.

THE HOW GREAT IT'S GONNA BE CLOSE

A variation of the Predictions of the Future Close is one that closes with a word picture of how great it's gonna be. First we describe how bad it is now. Then we present our recommendation. The close paints a picture of money, fame, glory, peace, freedom, productivity, etc. as a result of buying our product or implementing our recommendation.

The trick here is to construct the closing word picture first. Then we can back up to the opening and describe how bad the current situation is in regard to each element we describe in the dose.

THE BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS CLOSE

Another approach is the Bridge Over Troubled Waters Close.

The idea here is that we define a goal that the audience would like to achieve. The problem is that there are major obstacles to achieving this goal. These are shark-infested waters. There is danger, risk, and uncertainty in achieving our goal. The odds of the audience making it alive with their health intact are not good. Fortunately, your firm provides a bridge over these troubled waters that will allow them to safely cross over to the other side and get the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

THE AUTHORITATIVE QUOTE CLOSE

1. Top 2. Decision Makers 3. CIA = Public Library 4. CSF = Critical Success Factors 5. goals 6. chemistry 7. Pathos = emotion 8. Ethos = trust/confidence 9. enemy 10. Breakthrough Strategy = a small decision that will result in a rewarding experience as a direct result of your intervention.

THE AUTHORITATIVE QUOTE CLOSE

Another idea for a close is to build it around some authoritative quotation which is in direct support of your objective.

For example, listen to this close.

"And now, in summary and in conclusion, let me tell you the John Ruskin story. Does anyone know who John Ruskin was? He's dead, you know. He died almost 100 years ago. He was a real ugly fellow, too. (Show a transparency picture of John Ruskin.) One of the ugliest fellows I've ever seen. Why are we talking about John Ruskin? We're talking about John Ruskin because you often quote something he wrote. There's hardly a week goes by that you don't quote John Ruskin.

"But when you quote him, you quote the shorthand version of something he wrote. The shorthand version you quote says, 'There ain't no free lunch.' But I want to show you the longhand version of 'There ain't no free lunch'-the way he originally wrote it (show transparency of John Ruskin quote), and then I'll have a footnote for you."

Footnote: "And so in conclusion I say to you: beware of (show Beware of Bargains transparency) bargains in: parachutes, life preservers, fire extinguishers, brain surgery, and computers."

To tailor this to your audience, simply change the word "computer" to your product or service, or to the profession or occupation of your audience.

Other examples of authoritative quotes might be:

Some men see things as they are, and ask- "Why?" I dare to dream of things that never were, and ask-why not?
George Bernard Shaw

To a group of personnel people:

When you hire people smarter than you are, you prove that you are smarter than they are.
R. H. Rand

For a public service presentation:

No man can truly help another man without helping himself.
Ralph Waldo Emerson

I shall pass this way but once.
Any good that I can do
Any kindness I can show
To any human being
Let me do it now
Let me not defer nor neglect
For I shall not pass this way again.
William Penn

Or how about this attention-getting play on words: There are two kinds of failures; those who thought and never did, and those who did and never thought.
John Charles Salak

If you don't have your own book of quotations, your local librarian can fix you right up.

THE EMOTIONAL CLOSE

Remember, Aristotle said that it is not enough to appeal to reason and logic. He said we must also appeal to the emotions. So don't be bashful about putting emotion into your close.

Here is my close to IBM dealers and distributors.

"And so in summary and in closing I say to you: I love you, I want you, I need you, I can't get to where I want to go without you. And I believe in you. I believe the power within you and the support behind you are infinitely greater than the task before you.

"So come along with me. Let's walk this road together. And I believe, I believe, I believe you will walk the road to Glory."

You can even integrate audience participation and music into your close. Here is my dose to an IBM sales rally.

And so I say to you,
It's morning in America,
And it's sunrise at IBM,

So look across the valley.
The sun is shining.
The grass is green.
The corn is as high as an elephant's eye,
And out yonder the moose is loose
And colored blue.
Everything's gonna be all right.
And now I ask you-Do you see the light?
Say "I see the light."
Do you believe? Say "I believe."
And so I have a vision of the future.
I hear the music playing.
(start the music-"When the Saints Go Marching In")
It's playing "When the Saints Go Marching In,"
But the words are different.

They say:
Oh, When Big Blue Goes Marching on
Oh, When Big Blue Goes Marching On
Oh Lord, I Want to Be In That Number
When Big Blue Goes Marching On.

THE EMOTIONAL CLOSE

Here is an example of a close for a personal development or management development presentation. This one has a little bit of everything-logic, emotion, quotes, and audience participation.

And so if you want to soar with the eagles,
And not walk with the turkeys,
I'm talking to you.
If you want more fame in your future than you had in your past,
I'm talking to you.
Where you are today is the result of choices you made yesterday.
But where you will be tomorrow
Will be the result of decisions
You will make today.

The greatest of the German philosophers said: "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, Begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it."

Shakespeare said a similar thing:
"There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries."
The choice is yours.
Let's all take the final exam together.
There are only three questions.
The answers are one word each.
The only person I can change is _____.
The only day I can start is _____.
The only time I can make the decision is _____.

Other sources of a close are personal experiences of yourself or of someone with whom the audience would recognize or identify. These must relate and tie-in to your closing theme. They are most effective when they paint a picture of the following

From failure to success
From depression to elation
From weakness to strength
From poor to rich
From sick to strong
From defeat to victory
From the bottom of the heap to the top of the mountain

You get the idea. And if the punch line can be told with an Alfred Hitchcock closing style-they'll never forget it.

The presenter's secret weapon

Find out why questions are an essential and integral part of an effective presentation.

What would you guess is the single most important weapon to use in getting attention, keeping interest, and receiving feedback on how you're doing?

You just read the correct answer. It's the question.

Nothing can do so much for so many as the question. And nothing is as effective as the question to give you immediate feedback on the comprehension, understanding, and agreement of the audience. Questions are an essential and integral part of an effective presentation. Not just any question, but well-thought-out, planned, and prepositioned questions. And the planned question is an important item on your cheat sheet.

You should consider a question for either the introduction of a key point or as a way of finalizing the key point, or both.

For example, in presenting my company's corporate strategy, I introduce a key point by asking the audience whether they think our company is primarily a technology-driven company or primarily a market-driven company. Well, let me tell you, that really gets the juices flowing. Most people had never thought about the company in those terms. Not only do they voluntarily start responding, they start arguing with each other. Nobody ever went to sleep during that question, or the presentation of the material that followed on that subject.

The key to the question is to make it stimulating and thought-provoking: questions that call on experience, views, or opinions. Questions that start with phrases like, "What is your opinion of ... ?" or, "What is the first thing you would do if ... ?" or, "What do you think is the cause of ... ?"

What we do not want are mundane questions with a self-evident answer of yes or no.

You do want to cause early success with the audience, so you'll want the first few questions to be easy to answer.

The most dramatic and tongue-in-cheek example of causing early success I ever saw was a presenter who asked a member of the audience to pick a number between one and ten. He responded with "four." The presenter said, "That's the correct answer." Of course, any answer would have been the correct answer.

On a more serious note, you should ask questions that:

- Relate to the key point you are presenting
- Are clear and concise
- Emphasize one point only
- Reveal the audience's understanding

There are different types of questions and different questioning techniques. Here are some types of questions that are suited for an audience size of fewer than 50 people.

THE RIFLE SHOT QUESTION

This is where you make eye contact with a specific individual, call him by name, then ask the question. This is the most common type of question.

THE TIME BOMB QUESTION

This is where you ask the question of the audience as a group, then call on a specific person to answer only after you have finished the question. This is an effective technique for getting attention and keeping interest.

After a few of these types of questions, the audience will really perk up since they don't know who is going to be called on to answer-and nobody wants to be embarrassed by not knowing what the question was.

THE RICOCHET QUESTION

This is where you redirect a question that has been asked of you to another member of the audience. This is a good technique if you want a little more time to think about your answer. It is also helpful in assessing the understanding of the audience about the subject. It's effective for audience participation and especially good for handling some types of troublemakers.

THE REBOUND QUESTION

This is where the presenter rephrases the question and directs it back to the person who asked it. This technique is also good for certain types of troublemakers and tends to reduce or eliminate frivolous questions.

Which type of question is the best?

No single one, but all of the above. It is best to have a mix of questions, with the inherent elements of suspense and surprise.

These types of questioning techniques presuppose that you either know the people or they have tent cards to facilitate calling them by name. But what if you don't know the people, and they don't have tent cards? The answer is a seating chart. A seating chart is an 8 1/2 X 11 piece of paper with the names of the people and their relative position in the room.

The simplest and easiest way to get a seating chart is to ask the host or person running the meeting if they have one. Sometimes, but not often, they will.

The next best way is to sit in on the meeting kick-off if the attendees are asked to introduce themselves. Have the room arrangement roughed out with the boxes for each position. Then all you have to do is write their names in the boxes. This has the added advantage that you can also make brief notes about special backgrounds, experiences, skills, and so forth. This will allow you to personalize and tailor your questions to specific individuals. Another way of getting a seating chart with names is to sit in the back of the room and ask a staff member, or another presenter who is familiar with the audience, to help you fill in the names.

If none of the above works you can still sit in on other presentations and listen to names as they are used by other presenters, or by attendees among themselves before the meeting and at coffee breaks. Using this technique, you can get at least 25% of the names. That's all you need to personalize your questions.

In any event, get some names. You want to direct your question to John by name, not by, "Hey you."

Well, all that Q & A is fine for a small audience, but what if it's a larger group? You can't really have questions and answers for a large group, right? Wrong. You sure can have questions for a large group-you just change your style and use a different technique.

The key is to phrase the question in such a way that it causes a short answer and provides a hint to the type of answer we are looking for.

For example, we have the sing-a-long.

THE SING-ALONG QUESTION

Here the question is directed not to an individual, but to the entire audience. Examples: "The bottom line reason we're in business is to make _____" (What?). Or, if I were talking about the relationship between unit cost and volume, I might say, "If I increase the volume the unit cost will go _____" (Which way?).

Another version of the sing-along question is to ask for a show of hands on a subject, an opinion, an experience, and so on.

THE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTION

Here we give the audience a hint by suggesting some answers. For example, in talking about lawyers I make the following statement: "You would probably guess that we have more lawyers per 1000 of population than the Japanese.... But how many more? ... Twice as many? ... Three times as many? ... Ten times as many?" The key to this technique is to make brief eye contact with multiple people as you call out the multiple choices. At the same time extend your arm in a gesture of directing the question to multiple people

THE ASK AND ANSWER QUESTION

This is a technique where you ask a question, pause, and then answer it yourself. For example, "Of all the stockbrokers in the country, what percent would you guess don't own any stock?" (Pause) "Would you believe 70% of all stockbrokers don't own any stock?"

Please, let's not use the mundane "Are there any questions?" If we have done our homework, we will have planned provocative questions that will be of interest to the audience. Answers to the questions will let you know whether or not your audience understands and agrees.

Don't let your mind trick you into false thinking about the value and importance of questions. For example:

-They're more trouble than they're worth.

Answer: Not true. It's not a lot of trouble. It is a lot of planning. As for the value-there is no known substitute.

-I just don't have the time. There's too much material to cover.

Answer: You do have the time. You will do much better to cover less material with questions and discussion than more materials without.

-I'm afraid I'll lose control.

Answer: Not if you do your homework and plan the content and position of each question. What we're looking for is a controlled discussion using questions.

-I'm afraid I'll get into arguments and personality conflicts with loudmouth know-it-alls.

Answer: Not if you follow the rules of how to handle the troublemaker.

-I'm more comfortable just giving a straight presentation.

Answer: You may be. However, the primary objective of your presentation says nothing about your comfort level. You are more likely to achieve your objective if you have interaction with the audience.

There is no better way to get attention and keep interest than a well-thought-out and well-planned question. It is natural for people to want to know the answer to a good question. Questions will also enhance the comprehension and retention of the material.

Questions are just as important to you the presenter. The quality of the answers let you know how effectively you are communicating your message. Areas of misunderstanding are quickly identified. If the answers to questions in a particular area are consistently vague, or wide off the mark, then you need to either spend more time in that area or, more likely, think of a different conceptual way of presenting the information-such as using an analogy.

Here is something you will run into when giving a presentation to different levels of people within the same organization. People at the bottom of the organizational chart are sometimes reluctant to express an opinion until they know which way the wind is blowing at the top of the organization. So direct a few early questions to the top of the mountain. Make sure they are opinion questions. There are no wrong answers to an opinion question. That will clear the air for the rest of the climbers. Even better is to get the top man to introduce you and the subject and announce his support and endorsement. That guarantees a successful presentation.

Why good visual aids are important

Seventy-five percent of the total inventory in your head comes to you visually. Here are some tips on good visual aids.

Of the total inventory of information you have in your head, 75% came to you visually, thirteen percent through hearing, and a total of twelve percent through smell, taste, and touch. Now let me ask you a question. Of the total inventory of information you have in your head, what percentage came to you through hearing?

When I say that in front of a live audience there is a long silence, even though I just told them the answer three seconds before. Occasionally, I will get one or two delayed and feeble answers of thirteen percent.

Suppose, instead, I showed them a picture and then asked the same question.

Note the difference between saying the words and seeing a picture. We know from studies that have been done that your audience will forget 75% or more of what you say in 24 hours or less.

Here is a trick I use at conventions or conferences where I am the speaker on the second day. Scared me to death every time I do it, but it's never failed yet. I remind the attendees that the first speaker, just 24 hours ago, talked for 32 minutes. I then say, "If you could remember just 25% of what they said, then you could talk for eight minutes on that subject. Would anybody like to volunteer to talk for eight minutes on what that speaker said?" There is a dead silence. I then ask, "Does anybody even remember the speaker's name?" I never cease to be amazed at the silence, followed by laughter.

Heraclitus said, "Eyes are more accurate witnesses than ears." And Alfred Lord Tennyson reminds us, "Things seen are mightier than things heard."

If I show you a picture, the comprehension and retention is three and a half times greater than just saying words. If I both show you the picture and give you the words that go with the music, the comprehension and retention is six times greater than just saying the words.

Homer said, "The mind is more slowly stirred by the ear than by the eye."

We remember:

10% of what we read

20% of what we hear

30% of what we see

50% of what we both see and hear

We can apply some common sense tests to this. Which do we remember best-faces or names? Faces of course. The image of the face gets in our brain through the eyes. The names get in our brain through the ears. Or have you ever tried to explain something complicated to somebody who is having trouble understanding? Then there's a breakthrough and she gets it, and says, "Oh, I get the picture." Have you ever heard anybody say, "Oh, I get the words?"

We have all heard that one picture is worth a thousand words. If that's true, then one picture is worth eight minutes of talking (at 120 wpm).

Good visual aids stimulate interest. They clarify, substantiate, and reinforce what has been said. Moreover, when presenting something new, the audience has no way of referring to a mental image of something they have never seen before. Just try describing a camel to someone who has never seen a camel. In fact, there are some things that are almost impossible to explain without visual aids.

Visual aids have been effective since they were first used by a man who came down from a mountain carrying two stone tablets with ten rules on them.

Encourage audience questions

Don't assume that if the group voices no questions, there aren't any.

Don't assume that if the group voices no questions, there aren't any. Audience members hold their tongues for any number of reasons. They might not have shifted gears to active participation yet. They might think their questions are stupid and that they should've understood you the first time around. They also may think their questions would be of limited interest to others and don't want to monopolize the time for their own clarification. They may feel inept at wording the question succinctly. They may not want to risk others' hostility with a controversial viewpoint or question. Or, they may have understood your presentation so thoroughly that they have no questions.

If you're typical of most speakers, you have three worries concerning audience questions. First, audience members may not have understood your presentation well enough to ask questions. Second, they may have no interest at all in your subject. And third, they may have written you off for reasons related to credibility.

To encourage questions, make sure your body language shows openness to the audience - wide-open arms, upturned palms, alert posture, raised eyebrows, a smile, movement toward the audience. All of these gestures and movements show that you welcome interaction.

Invite audience members' questions by asking something like, "What questions do you have?" rather than "Do you have any questions?" The least effective solicitation is to mumble, "Are there any questions?" as you glance up briefly, then return to your notes, adding, "Fine. If there are no questions, I'll move along so we can finish on time, "

Your affirmations following listeners' questions ("That's an excellent question"; "Thanks for asking that"; "I'm glad you brought that up, because...") encourage other listeners to risk asking their questions.

If you anticipate difficulty in generating questions during the question-and-answer period, try distributing index cards at the beginning or end of the session and asking participants to jot down their questions and pass them to the front. That way, you can sort through the cards, selecting the questions likely to benefit the most listeners. This technique gives you maximum control and flexibility while still showing responsiveness to the audience.

You also can generate questions with a hand-raising opinion poll: "How many of you think it would be feasible to raise this amount of money in six months' time?" (Take a count.) "In a year?" (Take another count.) "Lisa, you raised your hand for six months. What prompted that vote?" Such informal probing relaxes the group, encourages openness, and establishes a comfortable climate for expressing opinions.

It's not unheard of for presenters to pose their own questions. For example: "A question groups frequently ask me and that may be of interest to you is...." Or, "A question Bill Maxwell raised at our last meeting may still warrant discussion. He wanted to know if...." Or, "An issue I didn't get into during my earlier remarks is.... Do any of you have a particular concern about how...?"

You may want to repeat questions or comments overheard prior to the presentation or during breaks. For example: "Before the session, I heard someone express the idea that.... How many of you agree?" This follow-up on your part gives audiences time to consider their own ideas and questions and shows that you take their issues seriously.

Maybe most important of all: When you field a question, be brief in your answer. If you take 10 minutes to answer the first one or two questions, some participants may fear antagonizing less interested audience members by asking one that could lengthen your presentation another half hour.

Incorporating movement into your presentation

Just a few steps forward into the audience occasionally will convey the message: "I'm one of you."

There is a psychological barrier that separates you from your audience. It's a line that runs across the front of the room-it's like a wall. It creates the atmosphere of me/they, of we/them. It's like the offense versus the defense. It's an adversarial relationship.

You need to break down that barrier-and it's easy to do. Just walk across the line occasionally. That says, "I'm one of you"; "I'm on your side"; "We're all in this together." Just a few steps forward into the audience will do it. If you're on a stage or a riser it's even more important to break the barrier by stepping down to ground level for a minute or two. If that's not practical, the least you can do is walk to the front of the stage.

Never underestimate the power of nonverbal communication. Use it to your advantage. What you do speaks louder than what you say. Walk across the line.

Be a triple-threat presenter. Have three positions, not one. The only thing worse than standing in one spot for an entire presentation is to be a racehorse running back and forth across the front of the room. That's a terrible distraction.

Here's the game plan. Position #1 is the home position for the mainstream part of your presentation. Position #2 is for the alternative media you will use to change the pace, add emphasis, and give the illusion of spontaneity. Decide in advance which material will be the mainstream media, and which will be the alternative. Use the alternative media at least once every ten minutes.

Now in every presentation there are several places where you will elaborate in some detail on some point or concept. For some of these, you will know the subject so well and the words will flow so smoothly that you will have no need to refer to notes. That's the time to cross the line and break the barrier of the wall. That's position #3. Again, decide in advance specifically when and where you will do this. Then rehearse. And do it the same way every time.

Making eye contact will keep them interested

Don't handicap yourself: Look at your audience.

Have you been in one of those meetings where the presenter is looking at the floor, the ceiling, or out into space with a glazed look?

We speak to people through our eyes. Don't handicap yourself. Look at the audience. More specifically, look directly at one person in the audience for three to five seconds.

Here's how. Before you speak the next sentence or thought, lock in on a specific person and hold that eye contact until you have completed that phrase or that thought. Careful now-not too long, because eye contact can turn into a stare and that can be intimidating.

If you have tent cards, name plates, or if you know the people or some of them, use their names as you speak to them.

If you do these two simple things-make eye contact and use their names-I promise you, you will have no problem getting attention and keeping interest.

The best use of this technique I've ever seen is by the professors at the Harvard Business School. They will look at every person in the room multiple times and call them by name. And every person there thinks, "He's talking just to me." And he is-for those five seconds. Let me tell you about a hidden danger. It happens to me all the time.

In a typical audience, there will be a few people who have big smiles on their faces and nod their heads yes to everything you say. Guess what the natural human tendency is? That's right, to look only at these people who are smiling and nodding yes.

Here's a story that illustrates the effect smiles from the audience can have on the presenter. At a university a particular professor had the annoying habit of racing back and forth across the front of the classroom. In this particular class, a large percentage of the students were from the same fraternity. They put together a plan back at the house. Here's what they did. When the professor reached a specific spot in his racing in front of the class, they would all smile. When he moved away from that spot they would all stop smiling. Well, before that class was over, guess where the professor ended up standing? You got it-exactly on the spot where he got a lot of smiles.

There's a bonus for you if you concentrate on eye contact. It keeps you from turning your back on the audience and reading from a screen, a board, or a flip chart. You can't read a script and have eye contact with the audience. So lift up your head, smile, and look 'em in the eye.

Tailor the presentation to the audience

Among other things, catering to your audience affords you the opportunity to add real-time spice to both your opening and the close.

We tailor the presentation by learning as much as possible about our audience in advance of the meeting. In the introductions you will pick up additional information for the tailoring of the presentation to the audience. The introduction technique also affords you the opportunity to add real-time spice to both your opening and the close. Here's how. Have a pen or pencil handy during the introductions. As certain information comes to light during the introductions that you can relate and tie in to the content of the opening, make a note of it and the name of the individual linked to it. Then in your opening refer to that person by name and the subject of his or her comment.

For example, suppose Joe Smith says, "... and I'm here because I need help in so and so." Then in your opening you can say, "And Joe, I'm pleased to tell you that we are going to cover so and so in great detail. In fact, by the time we finish, you will..."

Then at the close, guess what? That's right. We refer to Joe and his comment again-perhaps with a direct question such as: "And in summary, Joe, have these key points helped you with so and so?" Well, of course he will say yes. And you've already got a testimonial.

That kind of personalization adds spice, and breathes life and spontaneity into your presentation.

In the final analysis, our objective is to tailor the presentation to the interest of the group. The first opportunity we have to do that is in the opening. You will be amazed at the effect minor modifications will have on the initial audience perception-even though you're using an off the shelf or canned pitch.

Speaking of tailoring and effective openings let me tell you one of the most clever things I have ever seen in my life.

I used to run a class for new managers at IBM. Its purpose was to give them management exposure to the company and provide them with information on management philosophy, rules of the road, and Dos and Don'ts. To accomplish this we had guest presenters representing key functional areas of the business.

One of the key areas was personnel. To present this we had the manager of personnel. Well, this guy was an absolute master at tailoring a presentation to an audience. Let me explain.

If you think about it and put yourself in the place of a new manager, there are certain obvious subjects you want to know about and will have questions about in the area of personnel. Things like merit pay increases, appraisals, how to handle the poor performer, and so on.

This guy had given this presentation so many times that he knew there were always eight to ten subjects that new managers would like to discuss. And they were always the same eight or ten subjects. He had a prepared presentation on each of these subjects.

So in his opening, rather than introducing the subjects he was going to talk about, he would walk up to a blank flip-chart stand, and ask the audience what they would like to talk about in the area of personnel management. As subjects were volunteered from the floor he would write them on the flip chart. Guess what? They were always the same eight or ten subjects. The only difference was the sequence. He had the material for each subject in a manila folder. He just rearranged the sequence of the folders, and began presenting the subject on the flip chart.

I saw him do this many times. It never failed. He always presented the same subjects. He was always giving, the same presentation he had planned to give, anyway-just in a different sequence.

The impact on the audience was dramatic. Not only was he talking about what they wanted to talk about, but they were dumbfounded at his in-depth knowledge and statistical quotes about what appeared to be spontaneously volunteered and unrehearsed subjects.

There is another type of tailoring we need to think about.

If you are one of multiple presenters on a program, you need to understand what came before you and what's coming after you. If you do, then you will be able to tie-in to material that has already been covered and refer to things that are yet to come.

Again, you can create the perception that your presentation was specifically designed to fit right here, and to complement the other presentations.

There is nothing worse than finding out after the fact that 50% of your material was covered by the previous speaker, or, even worse, that you flat out contradicted the previous speaker and with no explanation.

So if you can, sit in on the other presentations-at least the one just preceding yours. If you can't do that, try to get a detailed briefing in advance from the host.

Talk in threes and contrast

Find out why these are the two most common practices of great speakers throughout history.

Studies have been done of the great speakers throughout recorded history. Two common denominators stand out. The first is called a "three- part list," or we could simply say "speaking in threes." Here are some examples:

Of the people,
By the people,
For the people.

I came.
I saw.
I conquered.

Friends,
Romans,
Countrymen,
Lend me your ears.

A second characteristic of great speakers is their use of contrast. For example:

Ask not what your country can do for you.
Ask what you can do for your country.

Or how about a study in contrast from the surface of the moon:
That's one small step for man;
One giant leap for mankind.

Or what about the best known and most quoted verse in all of English literature:
To be
Or not to be.
That is the question.

If you are clever you can combine speaking in threes with contrast. The master of this was Winston Churchill. You may recall that he said:
Never in the field of human conflict has
So much
Been owed by so many
To so few.

Here we see a list of three, but notice that item number three is in contrast to the other two. We can all be more effective if we speak in threes and in contrast. I'm practicing up on it myself. For example, the first thing I said in this book was:

We're not here to talk about:
Hardware
Software
or Applications.

I followed this with another list of threes:
What we're here to talk about is:
Money
Fame
Glory

Talk rather than read

The reason we have so many sluggish speeches and presentations is that many speakers read to their audiences - often, something that wasn't meant to be read aloud.

The differences in spoken and written communication are enormous. For one thing, readers can reread a document if they don't understand it the first time; in spoken communication, the listener has only one chance to understand. A reader can stop, put the document aside, and consult a reference book for the meaning of a word. A listener can't. A reader can reread and untangle a long sentence. A listener can't. A reader can brush up on key points by reviewing the structure of the document. A listener can't review unless the speaker provides repetition and visuals.

Simply being aware of the differences between written and spoken language will make you more conscious of what it takes to explain a complex concept to an audience. The following guidelines can also help.

Use simple words and short sentences. The most predictable effect of using words that your audience doesn't understand is that they'll stop listening. Or worse, they'll feel angry or insulted, assuming that you're trying to impress them or make them feel ignorant, or that you didn't care enough to find out in advance how much they knew about your subject. And all of these reactions are detrimental to your purposes.

Big words aren't necessarily a sign of intelligence. The ability to make a complex subject understandable to the layperson is the mark of an effective communicator.

If you don't understand something, use longer words. Share the ignorance with your readers.

Horton Laws

Had presidential hopeful Bill Clinton told the American people that he wanted a cabinet that "mirrored the physiognomy of America" rather than a cabinet that "looked like America" would he have won the presidency? We'll never know-but we do know that word choice is critical in public speaking. Consider the following guidelines when composing your speeches.

- Choose the familiar word over the unfamiliar: unusual instead of anomalous; many instead of myriad, embarrassed instead of chagrined, cut instead of lacerated, rare instead of esoteric.

- Choose the specific over the general: warehouse instead of facility; Chevy truck instead of vehicle.

- Choose the short word over the long: use instead of utilize; change instead of modification. Don't let your education prevent you from being an effective speaker. A large vocabulary is handy for understanding someone else or for selecting just the right word to convey your message. But don't show it off and confuse your audience.

- Choose short sentences over long ones: Long sentences lose listeners. Short ones are clearer and easier to deliver with a normal breathing rhythm.

- Choose one strong word over several weak ones: we agree instead of we are found to be in agreement with; he continued instead of he went on to say.

Don't use words you can't pronounce. Someone in an audience once corrected my pronunciation of subsidence in such an embarrassing way that I'll never mispronounce it again. Lyndon Johnson's speechwriters avoided words he found difficult to say, and I've found that to be the best solution for myself. In taping an audio series with Nightingale-Conant, I learned that I simply can't pronounce the word error, now I remember to say mistake instead.

A colleague of mine pronounced the word relevant as revelant over and over during an important customer briefing. Her boss, sitting in on the meeting, made note of the error and corrected her afterward, but not in time to prevent the smirks of the customers my colleague had hoped to impress. Using a simpler, more familiar word is always preferable to using one that you mumble, muffle, slur, or overarticulate due to anxiety about getting it right. Remember: The simple word creates impact.

Use specific, vivid language. Try to help your audience understand your message with graphic, vivid "picture" words that enable them to see and feel. Not "an angry individual" but "a yelling, freckle-faced teenager." Not "an orderly operation" but "a print run where we made 428 copies without a single skipped page or ink smudge in the margins." Not "a growing concern to our profitability" but "in six months, we'll be in the red by \$33,000."

Use the "you" approach. Focus on your audience members as if talking to them individually. Not "as this group is probably aware" but "as you are aware." Not "if management agrees" but "if we agree to work together."

Omit clichés of the occasion. Avoid the tired, overused phrases that sound as though they were lifted from a book: "facing an important challenge"; "we welcome the opportunity"; "we must forge ahead"; "we are only as good as the decisions we make"; "he fought a hard fight." Such expressions sound out of place and dramatic in describing everyday situations.

Use colloquialisms and slang when appropriate. Just as we dress differently on different occasions, we speak in ways that create identification with a particular audience. "He informed us of his decision about the downsizing" is formal. "He laid it on the line about our jobs" is informal. Your use of formal or informal expressions should match the situation.

Avoid poor grammar. Proper grammar is still the mark of education in our society. Watch for incorrect use of pronouns, such as "John and him went to the store." Watch for misplaced adjectives when adverbs are called for: "He did good" when you mean "He did well." Be careful about subject-verb agreement: "He don't have the proper identification" when you mean "He doesn't have the proper identification." Avoid double negatives, such as "The company doesn't have no inventory at this site" when you mean "The company doesn't have any inventory at this site."

If you're feeling a little panicky about this issue, consider reviewing a good grammar text. If I may sneak in a brief commercial here, mine is called Good Grief, Good Grammar (published by Facts on File and Fawcett). It starts with the basics, adds a little humor, and highlights the tips most appropriate for business people.