

Edward R. Tufte's Presentation Tips

Show up early

- Something good is bound to happen—if there's no need to fix a mechanical problem or resolve a room conflict, you can always mingle with the audience.

How to start

- Clearly tell the audience: What the problem is, who cares, and what your solution is.
- Notes on the stumble-bum technique (a high-risk approach): Tufte described a talk given by a humble high school math teacher to a lecture hall full of mathematics professors. On his first slide, the math teacher had a simple proof, with an error on the third line. Naturally, the professors leaned forward in their chairs to point out the flaw. For the rest of the presentation, the audience hung on every word, waiting for the next slip.
- Of course, there was no slip. Caution: if you use this technique, you had better know your stuff.
- Write out your own introduction.

Never apologize

- Most people wouldn't have noticed the issues for which you're apologizing—and it just sounds lame.

For complex information use: Particular, General, Particular

- Give a particular specific example, then a general overview, followed by a repeat of the particular to reinforce the point.

Always provide a handout

- Text on paper can provide more information than verbal communication (e.g. it takes 22 minutes to read the top half of the New York Times aloud). This allows them to become engaged.
- Assures that each point is covered (even if you forget something).

Match your presentation to the level of The New York Times or Wall Street Journal

- Audiences don't suddenly become dumber when they sit down to hear you speak—no reason to "dumb down" anything!

Audiences are precious: respect them

- Be clear—not simpleminded.

Humor—make sure it's on point, not nasty or gratuitous

- It's preferable to leave humor out if you risk alienating anyone—let alone the possibility of not being funny.

Do not use masculine pronouns—use plurals

- Even though it may not always be grammatically correct, you should say "they" instead of "him or her" and it will sound better—both because it's shorter and because no one can be alienated. Why risk not communicating simply because someone may be sensitive?

Questions need to be treated very carefully

- People's opinion may be based more on how you answer their question than on how you present.
- People are often really saying "What about me?" when they ask a question.
- Right after you call for questions, count to 10 before assuming no one will ask.
- To assure questions are asked, plant a person in the audience and give them a question.
- This also gets others motivated.

There must be a better way than using the overhead projector

- Tufte refers to it as "a trapezoid strip show" because the shape of the projected image is distorted, and people often use the technique of revealing only one line of the image at a time. Two other problems are that you have to turn off the lights (some people will fall asleep) and overheads only provide a fraction of information that can fit on a handout.

Show your enthusiasm!

- Don't hide behind a lectern. Use gestures. Walk around, directly engaging the audience. (If you're not enthusiastic, why are you presenting on that topic?)

Finish early

- You never hear someone say "I really wish they had talked on and on for another 10 minutes."

Work hard

- Prepare and practice for a critical audience.
- Practice in front of a video camera to spot flaws, mannerisms, and idiosyncrasies.
- In addition to using notes for content, make "metanotes" reminding you to use techniques; like making eye contact, not to mumble, not to keep sipping the water.

Innovate

- Don't be trapped by the conventional forms of the presentation. Be creative: find ways to take the presentation beyond a linear presentation of facts, and instead make it become something like a dialogue with your colleagues.

Drink enormous amounts of water

- If you're flying to a presentation this is particularly important as air travel really dehydrates you.
- And never drink alcohol.