

PUBLIC SPEAKING

INSPIRING OTHERS

MAKING YOUR CASE

VISUAL AIDS

# Guide to Persuasive Presentations



**Harvard  
Business  
Review**

*Preparing an important presentation? Whether your audience is a small group of colleagues or a larger gathering of clients, this guide will give you the practical advice you need to master public speaking. You'll learn how to:*

- Shape your information to specifically address your audience's needs
- Prepare visual aids that develop, rather than distract from, your points
- Overcome stage fright
- Grab your listeners' attention and hold it

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# The Basic Presentation Checklist

Here's how to prepare and deliver that next speech effectively

**In a perfect world**, you would have learned about the presentation months ago. Your personal assistant would have spent weeks researching startling factoids about the topic. And you'd be sitting down well in advance of the event with hours to spend preparing your presentation.

Instead, the reality usually is last-minute. You're pulling together material on the fly from a number of old talks and hoping no one will notice that the whole hasn't really been thought through.

But you can improve that all-too-typical experience with this basic checklist of the necessary steps for a successful presentation. Following these steps won't give you a less hectic schedule, but they can ensure that you don't miss something obvious the next time you have to talk in public.

**1. Develop the elevator speech.** The first step is the most important and the most often ignored. Here's how it works. You're on the elevator riding down from your room to the mezzanine floor where the conference is going on. The person standing next to you sees your name badge and says, "Oh, I was thinking of attending your talk. What's it about?" You've got less than 30 seconds to tell her. What do you say?

You need to craft one sentence that answers that question. The answer should clearly contain the benefit that the listener will derive from the speech. For example, President Kennedy might have said, "My inaugural address is about how we can strengthen America and defeat world communism by working together on behalf of freedom at home and abroad." The thought process will often be difficult, but it will help you focus your thinking about what you want to say.

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**Match the need that the audience has to act on its new knowledge with some specific suggestions about what to do.**

**2. Figure out the question to which your information is the answer.** At the heart of your presentation is a body of information that you and you alone have. That's why you've been invited to speak. But you can't begin by simply dumping that data on your audience. Listeners come to a presentation asking, "Why are we here?" That's the question you need to answer first. So reason backwards. Look at what you want to say—the information you have—and figure out what question the audience would have to have in mind in order to make that information a fascinating, provocative answer.

You need to spend approximately the first third of your speech asking that question—more if the question is not well understood by the audience, less if it is. You may have to do some research. Here's where you reveal to the audience the startling facts and interesting trends that will establish you as someone in the know and create a need for your listeners to hear your answer.

In Kennedy's case, he had to spend some time at the beginning of the address establishing the threat of world communism in order for his response—a strong national defense and the Peace Corps—to be interesting to his listeners. Because the threat was already widely subscribed to by the American people in 1961, Kennedy could deal with it quickly.

**3. Create the opener.** Now you need to develop the opening story or anecdote—or question or factoid or statistic—that will establish the topic of your talk and grab the listeners' interest in a very few words. This section of the talk should take no more than a couple of minutes. Think of it as the speech in brief. You don't want to give away your whole talk, but you do want to both orient and tease your listeners so that they have some idea of what's coming and want to hear more. Pointed, carefully crafted personal anecdotes work best when they don't contain any irrelevant information. Jokes are usually not a good idea—you're at your most nervous moment in the presentation, and punch lines are always hard to deliver well. The opportunities for screwing up are legion.

An exception to that rule—justifiable perhaps because the speaker was a humorist—comes from the brilliant opening of Art Buchwald's graduation speech to Catholic University's Columbus School of Law in 1977. It's actually a personal anecdote and a joke.

"I am no stranger to the bar. I first became interested in the law when I was working in Paris for the *Herald Tribune*, and I covered a trial which had to do with a couple caught in a very compromising situation in a Volkswagen. Now, everyone in France was interested in the case because it had to do with such a small car. The defense lawyer argued it was impossible to do what the couple had been accused of doing in a Volkswagen. The judge said he didn't know if this was true or not, so he appointed a commission to study it. It took them six months to render their verdict, and they said 'it was possible but very difficult.'" Confident that he had captured his audience's attention, Buchwald went on to deliver his speech.

**4. Craft the ending.** You're almost done. Now you need to create an ending for the speech that is not a summary—that's boring—but rather gives the audience something to do with the information you've imparted. To return to Kennedy, he asked his listeners to join the Peace Corps or work on behalf of freedom around the world in the famous phrase, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Few of us get the chance to ask our audiences to do something that exciting, but we do owe them our best efforts toward real action, because audiences tend to remember what comes last in a presentation. The point is to match the need that the audience has to act on its new knowledge with some specific suggestions about what to do. The device also helps cement the memory of what the speech was about. Mere summaries cause listeners to tune out.

**5. Put it all together and eliminate the extraneous.** Now you're ready to take the pieces and assemble them into a compelling whole. Put the opener, the question section, the answer section, and the ending together, and use the elevator speech to eliminate everything that doesn't pertain to the topic. Most presentations try to cover too much rather than too little, and end up boring and overwhelming listeners with extraneous material. Be ruthless. No one ever protested because a presentation ended a little early.

**6. Rehearse, preferably in the room.** Nothing beats a dress rehearsal. You'll find out where the holes are, and what doesn't make sense. Invite a few colleagues to listen if the presentation is an important one, so that you can get the sense of what it's like to perform in front of an audience.

Ask them not to interrupt, but rather save their questions and comments until you're done, so that you can get a sense of timing and pacing.

**7. Check the location and the technology.**

Just before the event, get into the room where the talk will be held if you haven't already, and see how things look from the speaker's stand. Test your technology out, and ask someone to stand in the back of the room to see how well you can be heard. If there is bright lighting, get a feel for how that affects your ability to see your notes. The more familiar you are with the surroundings, the less you will be thrown off stride when the actual moment comes.

**8. When the time comes, be ready.** Shortly before you start, check your appearance in a mirror. If you're the nervous type, spend the time until you're "on" giving yourself a pep talk. Tell yourself that you've prepared thoroughly, that the material is good, and that the audience wants you to succeed. Re-label physical symptoms of nervousness, which everyone has, as the adrenaline necessary to help you succeed with sufficient energy. Don't allow yourself to get trapped in the vicious cycle of thinking, "I'm nervous because I'm going to fail because I'm nervous...." This thought progression is self-fulfilling and self-defeating. Instead, look at the audience face by face, and tell yourself, "that person looks friendly. I could talk to her. That one reminds me of my uncle, and he always liked me." When the moment finally arrives, take a deep breath, smile, and have fun.

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# How to Make Your Case in 30 Seconds or Less

**An elevator pitch can help capture an investor’s attention, open the door to a job, or win vital support for a new project.**

by Nick Wreden

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**In 1994**, Barnett Helzberg, Jr. was walking by The Plaza Hotel in New York City when he heard a woman hail Warren Buffett. Helzberg approached the legendary investor and said, “Hi, Mr. Buffett. I’m a shareholder in Berkshire Hathaway and a great admirer of yours. I believe that my company matches your criteria for investment.”

“Send me more details,” Buffett replied. A year later, Helzberg sold his chain of 143 diamond stores to Buffett.

Helzberg’s story is a classic example of a powerful elevator pitch. An elevator pitch gets its name from the 30-second opportunity to tell—and sell—your story during a three- or four-story elevator ride. The 30-second parameter is based on the typical attention span, according to the book *How to Get Your Point Across in 30 Seconds or Less* (Pocket Books, 1990) by Milo O. Frank. It’s one reason why the standard commercial or television “sound bite” lasts 30 seconds.

While elevator pitches are often associated with funding requests, they can be valuable every day. Job interviews, networking events, public relations opportunities, presentations to executives, and sales all demand the ability to successfully deliver a quick and concise explanation of your case.

A 30-second elevator speech quickly demonstrates that you know your business and can communicate it effectively. Yes, a lot of important facts may be left out, but today everyone is skilled at judging relevancy and making decisions with incomplete data. In fact, 15 seconds can be more powerful