

4.10.7: Making a Presentation for a Meeting

Learning Outcomes

- Create a presentation intended for a business meeting

With perspective on the technical tools, communications planning and information design, let's take this learning for a test drive.

What's considered an effective (that is, persuasive) presentation structure hasn't changed fundamentally over the centuries. In his analysis of dramatic structure in the *Poetics*, Aristotle identified a play as having three parts: a beginning, middle and end. The story begins with a "complication" (problem), ends with an "unraveling" (resolution), and follows a logical sequence of events from beginning to end. Hollywood screenwriters use the same structure and dynamics. Screenwriter, producer and author Syd Field, whom CNN called "the guru of all screen writers," translated this simple three-step structure into numerous books and workbooks, including the bestsellers *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* and *The Screenwriter's Workbook*.

In a business context, a good presentation is an effective presentation. That is, a good presentation achieves its intended outcome. Clearly, in order to achieve a specific outcome or objective, you need to know what it is. So, prior to crafting the drama (in word or slide), you need to hone in on three things:

- The purpose of your presentation
- Your audience
- Your (one) message

For a review of these elements, refer to What's my Presentation About.

Once you're clear on those points, let's proceed.

To build our presentation, we'll use presentation expert Nancy Duarte's interpretation of the classic 3-part story structure illustrated in Figure 1. For additional perspective on this structure, watch her TED Talk, "[The Secret Structure of Great Talks](#)," or read her Harvard Business Review article, "[Structure Your Presentation Like a Story](#)."

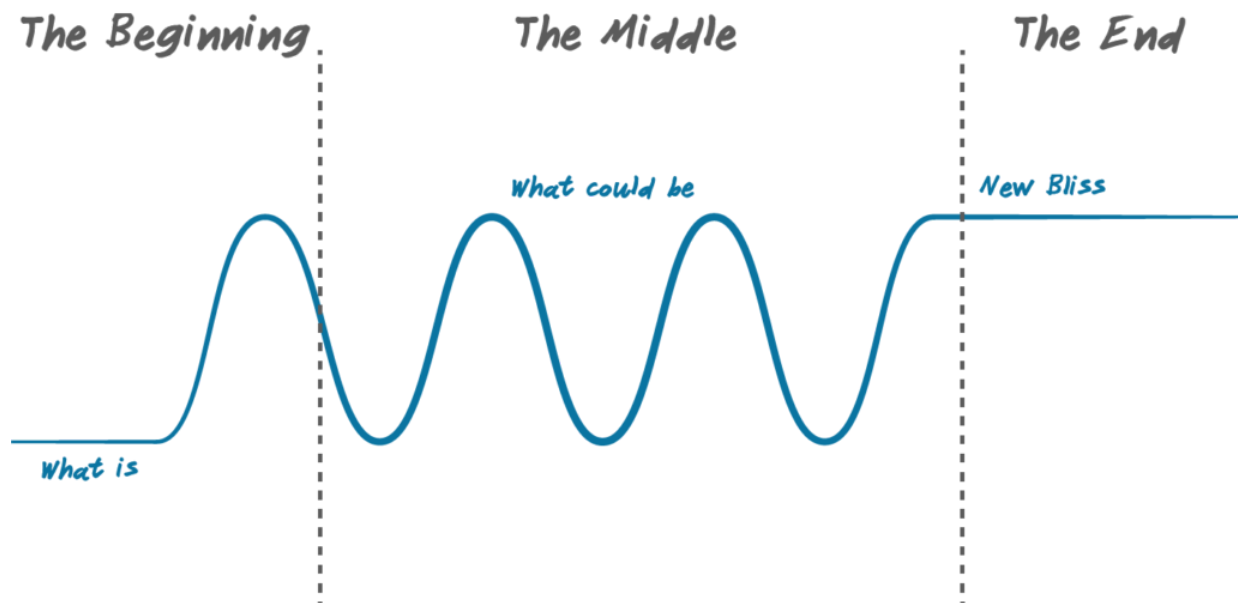


Figure 1. Persuasive story structure (Duarte, "Structure Your Presentation Like a Story," 2012).

The Beginning

The story starts with "What is"—the current state. Describe this baseline state in a way that is recognizable to the audience. This allows you and the audience to get in sync. And with this base level of agreement, your audience will be more receptive to your proposed change.

The second step is to introduce "What could be." The gap between what is and what could be adds tension and drama to your story and largely determines the significance of your presentation. If there's no conflict, no proposed change, what's the point of the

presentation?

Let's say you're an analyst on the new product development team of a retailer known for exclusive, trend-forward "house" branded products. Your company's reputation and revenue depends on consistent introduction of new consumer-product goods. Marketing and distribution are key strengths, but new-product performance is off, revenue is below expectations and the company's stock price recently fell 30 percent. Within your company, R&D (research & development) is strictly an insider's game; any ideas or innovations that weren't developed in-house are blocked. The problem is, you can't innovate fast enough—or with enough market demand accuracy—to meet financial and stock market expectations. You and the other analysts on your team have been tracking innovation trends and successes and you think the answer is opening the R&D works to outside ideas and innovations. Here's how you might lay out your presentation:

- **What Is:** We missed our quarterly earnings numbers, largely due to a failure to meet our innovation success targets over the last six months.
- **What Could Be:** Initial data suggests we could get back on track by modifying our R&D model to incorporate external innovations.

The Middle

The bulk of your the presentation is developing the contrast between what is and what could be in order to set up your proposed resolution of the conflict or challenge. The objective is also to establish the validity of your arguments, so your proposed call to action is perceived as a logical, ideally inevitable, conclusion of the conflict.

- **What Is:** We currently bear the full cost and risk of developing new products and our innovation success rate—the percentage of new products that meet financial objectives—is running 25 percent below target.
- **What Could Be:** Sourcing promising innovations from outside the company could reduce R&D costs and risk while also increasing our innovation success rate.
- **What Is:** Our R&D process is taking so long that we're missing trends and losing our market-leading brand reputation.
- **What Could Be:** We could license or buy promising innovations for a fraction of the cost it would take to develop them from scratch and leverage our marketing and distribution strengths to claim shelf and market share.
- **What Is:** Our below-plan performance and new product pipeline is costing us political capital with executive management, and we're at risk of losing budget and/or layoffs.
- **What Could Be:** Adopting an open innovation culture would allow us to create partnerships that leverage our strengths and drive revenue, regaining a position of value within the company.

The End

To craft a powerful close, heed Duarte's advice and avoid a list of bullet point to-dos. Your objective here is to achieve resolution of the conflict introduced at the beginning, to issue a call to action that inspires your audience to support your vision of what could be, a state Duarte refers to as the "new bliss."

Call to Action

To recover our position of a source of revenue and brand value, we need to start working to build a culture and networks that support open innovation and accelerate the development of new products, regardless of the source of the idea.

New Bliss

Our ability to drive value secures our position and reputations in the company, and in the marketplace, and pays off in employee stock value and profit sharing.

The new bliss articulates the proposed—and a desired future state—incorporating the WIIFM, what's in it for me, that motivates your audience to buy into and work to support the required change.

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