

4.10.5: What's my Presentation About

Learning Objectives

- Identify the purpose, audience, and message of your presentation

It may be helpful to think of your presentation as having three key moving parts or interlocking gears: purpose, audience and message. Let's walk through the presentation-development process at this planning level.

Purpose

Generally the first step in developing a presentation is identifying your purpose. Purpose is a multi-layered term, but in this context, it simply means objective or intended outcome. And why is this? To riff on the classic Yogi Berra quote, if you don't know where you're going, you might as well be somewhere else. That is, don't waste your audience's (or your own) time.

Your purpose will determine both your content and approach and suggest supplemental tools, audience materials and room layout. Perhaps your purpose is already defined for you: perhaps your manager has asked you to research three possible sites for a new store. In this case, it's likely there's an established evaluation criteria and format for presenting that information. Voila! your content and approach is defined. If you don't have a defined purpose, consider whether your objective is to inform, to educate, or to inspire a course of action. State that objective in a general sense, including what action you want your audience to take based on your presentation. Once you have that sketched in, consider your audience.

Audience

The second step in the presentation development process is audience research. Who are the members of your audience? Why are they attending this conference, meeting, or presentation? This step is similar to the demographic and psychographic research marketers conduct prior to crafting a product or service pitch—and is just as critical. Key factors to consider include your audience's age range, educational level, industry/role, subject matter knowledge, etc. These factors matter for two reasons: you need to know what they know and what they need to know.

Understanding your audience will allow you to articulate what may be the most critical aspect of your presentation: “WIIFM,” or what's in it for them. Profiling your audience also allows you adapt your message so it's effective for this particular audience. That is, to present your idea (proposal, subject matter, recommendations) at a depth and in a manner (language, terminology, tools) that's appropriate. Don't expect your audience to meet you where you are; meet them where they are and then take them where you want to go together.

Returning to the site analysis example mentioned earlier, knowing your audience also means getting clear on what management expects from you. Are you serving in an analyst role—conducting research and presenting “just the facts”—to support a management decision? Or are you expected to make a specific recommendation? Be careful of power dynamics and don't overstep your role. Either way, be prepared to take a stand and defend your position. You never know when a routine stand-and-deliver could become a career-defining opportunity.

Message

The third step is honing your message. In “TED's Secret to Great Public Speaking,” TED Conference curator Chris Anderson notes that there's “no single formula” for a compelling talk, but there is one common denominator: great speakers build an idea inside the minds of their audience. Take, for instance, Chimamanda Adichie's idea, which Anderson summarizes as “people are more than a single identity.”^[1] As Adichie expresses it: “The problem with stereotypes [of a single story or identity] is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.”^[2] Or Sir Ken Robinson's idea that creativity is a essential building block for learning. As he expresses the idea: “My contention is that creativity now is as important in education as literacy, and we should treat it with the same status.”^[3] Ideas matter because they're capable of changing our perceptions, our actions and our world. As Anderson puts it: “Ideas are the most powerful force shaping human culture.”^[4]

So if ideas are that powerful, more is better, right? Perhaps a handful or a baker's dozen? Wrong. As any seasoned sales person knows, you don't walk into a meeting with a prospective client and launch into an overview of every item in your company's product or service line. That's what's known as “throwing spaghetti on the wall to see what sticks.” And that's an approach that will have you wearing your spaghetti—and perhaps the dust from one of your client's shoes on your backside, as well. What audience

members expect is that you've done your homework, that you know them and their pain, and that you have something to offer: a fresh perspective, an innovative approach or a key insight that will change things for the better. As Chris Anderson puts it: "pick one idea, and make it the through-line running through your entire talk."^[5] One message, brought vividly and relevantly to life.

So now that you have a macro view of the presentation development process, let's review what can what can—and often does—go wrong so we can avoid the common mistakes.

-
1. Anderson, Chris. "[TED's Secret to Great Public Speaking](#)." *TED*, March 2016.
 2. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "[The danger of a single story](#)." *TED*, July 2009.
 3. Robinson, Ken. "[Do schools kill creativity?](#)" *TED*, Feb 2006.
 4. Anderson, *TED*
 5. Anderson, *TED*

Contributors and Attributions

CC licensed content, Original

- What's my Presentation About. **Authored by:** Nina Burokas. **Provided by:** Lumen Learning. **License:** *CC BY: Attribution*

4.10.5: [What's my Presentation About](#) is shared under a [not declared](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- **8.5: What's my Presentation About** by Nina Burokas is licensed [CC BY 4.0](#). Original source: <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wm-businesscommunicationmgrs>.