

# Presentation Skills

How to make your presentation interesting

Nina  
Sunday



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Presentation Interesting

**Nina Sunday**

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Brainpower Training Pty Ltd,  
Sydney, Australia.

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## About the author



Nina Sunday is an Australian-born speaker, educator and author.

A Queensland University graduate (Bachelor of Arts, Diploma in Education), Nina is one of approximately 750 professional speakers worldwide to earn Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) accreditation, the highest international speaking designation awarded to members of the Professional Speakers Association.

Nina has been engaged over 2000 times as a keynote speaker and workshop leader in Australia, Singapore, Japan, New Zealand and the South Pacific by more than 500 organisations. She has published two books, produced five training videos, been invited on radio as a guest expert on many occasions and written dozens of published articles.

Nina founded Australian training company, Brainpower Training, specialising in training in Leadership and Engagement, Service and Sales, Productivity and Emotional Intelligence.

From 2012 to 2013 Nina served two terms as NSW State President and board member of Professional Speakers Australia. The Australian Institute of Training and Development awarded her an *Innovation in Learning* award.

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# 5 common presenter's mistakes and how to avoid them

## Mistake #1 - Pacing back and forth

If your way of coping with nerves is to stalk back and forth like a caged cat, your audience will get so distracted they'll be more interested watching you wear a path in the rug than in what you have to say.

Maintain a positive stance, make good eye contact and smile. Then when you do move, you'll look and feel natural.

## Mistake #2 - Weak opening and closing

The first 90 seconds are crucial. We form a first impression in the blink of an eye.

Memorise your opening 90 seconds so it's powerful. You'll gain your audience's undivided attention which breeds self-confidence. Then you're on your way to a competent performance.

A strong close should include a review of your key ideas and a call to action. Then your audience will remember the important points you made and perhaps be inspired to take action.

## Mistake #3 - Relying too much on your slideshow

Multimedia should support your presentation; it shouldn't *be* the presentation.

The current trend is for slides to display fewer words. Use a strong photo with one key word or short phrase and let what you say be off the cuff. After all, you are the expert. Never ever read out the words off a slide.

## Mistake #4 - Lack of structure

Simply put, tell your audience at the start what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you just told them.

Make sure you structure a beginning, middle and an end.

## Mistake #5 - No audience interaction

Your presentation doesn't have to be all telling. Give some thought to adding a mini-activity.

For example, during a Customer Service presentation discussing the Proximity Rule, (to meet and greet within 10 feet), the speaker invited two volunteers to the front to measure out, using a tape measure, a distance of ten feet. It's visual, the message is clear and becomes more memorable.

Another simple activity is to suggest people find a partner to discuss or share some thoughts for a minute; or you can lead in to your next point by asking a question. It engages people and keeps your audience mentally alert.

Avoid these common presenters' mistakes and you'll come across as an expert speaker.

# How to grip and audience from your first line.

If I open a talk with this question and answer...

*Q. Do you know what's really scary about India?*

(Pause)

*A. The population is 1.3 billion people, yet 27% are under 15 years of age.*

this opening is dramatic and has impact.

What if I'd opened my talk instead with...

*Today I'm going to talk about the population growth in India.*

If you were in the audience, your response would probably be...ho hum!

There are many ways to open a presentation, but my personal favourite is to ask a provocative question relevant to the topic.

Four simple adjectives evoke a basic emotional response.

Those four words are: weird - scary - hard - stupid.

(Taken from Judy Carter's 'The Comedy Bible'.)

Put one of those words in a question, pause, then state an amazing fact, and you've got an opening that's dramatic and has impact.

For example:

*Q. Do you know what's really stupid about distributing our product catalogue to letterboxes in December?*

(Pause)

*A. In the first two weeks of December every year, 16 million catalogues are distributed!*

Here's the construction:

- question
- pause
- statement.

For example:

*Q. Do you know what's really scary about Customer Service?*

(Pause)

*A. The more you raise the bar, the more customers expect!*

This formula may not work with all material all of the time, but it probably works with much of your material most of the time. And when it does work, it creates impact.



## How to make it work

1. Avoid making a single statement that both asks and answers the question.

For example:

*Did you know it's scary our website attracts three million visitors every year but only 3% make a transaction?*

That construction is weak and does not have impact.

Remember. . . it's question - pause - statement.

Here's the same idea again, but this time using the construction, question - pause - statement:

*Q. Do you know what's really scary about our website?*

(Pause)

*A. It attracts 3 million visitors a year, yet only 3% of them make a transaction.*

2. Avoid using a lead-in statement such as:

*I'd like to ask you a question.*

Go straight in; ask the question. Be dramatic.

You might like to open this way even before you introduce yourself or overview what your talk will be about.

3. Avoid the temptation to use a quality other than *weird, scary, hard or stupid*.

*Do you know what's really amazing about...*

does not create the same effect as:

*Do you know what's really stupid about . . .*

*Weird, scary, hard, stupid* are four words with attitude!

And once you've asked your question, paused, and answered it, then relax, drop the dramatics and perhaps go on with...

*Hi, my name is <name>, and today we're going to discover ...*

In closing, do you know what's really scary about asking a question using *weird* or *scary* or *hard* or *stupid*, to open a presentation?

The more you take a risk with a provocative question, the more impact you have with your audience.

# Don't use notes when presenting. Be extemporaneous instead

When preparing to present, write it out, make cue cards, rehearse. But once in front of your audience, trust yourself to say it the right way in the right order.

Let me tell you a story about how I learned to avoid coming across as stiff or wooden, when presenting.

I was asked to deliver five minutes on my usual subject to an after dinner audience of 80 people. This audience size was out of my comfort zone. I was used to a training class of 16-20.

Rather than rehearsing my five minutes over and over til I was completely confident, instead I relied on creating good notes on cue cards.

I took my notes with me onstage; and my notes became my master. Instead of focusing on audience reaction, engaging them with eye contact, I became slave to 'getting it right'.

The outcome?

I came across as nervous, uncomfortable, lacking in confidence, in a word—wooden. Upon reflection, I vowed forevermore to rehearse til I knew it, then trust myself to speak off the cuff.

## It's all about self-trust

In extreme sport there's a motto - *check your equipment, then trust your equipment.*

Prepare, rehearse, then trust yourself, (trust your sub-conscious).

## So what if you forget a detail?

Firstly, your audience doesn't know what you forgot to say.

Secondly, if what you omitted was essential to understanding, and if you allow time for Q & A, a question allows you to respond confidently and appear the expert.

## Don't memorise

Have you discovered that, when rehearsing, each time you deliver there's a different logical flow?

If so, that's good. It means you are navigating intuitively through your content. Let go and allow it to flow.

## Be extemporaneous

The word comes from the Latin, *ex tempore* meaning 'out of the moment'. Extemporaneity is the quality of being able to deliver without notes and off the cuff what's been carefully prepared.

## How to be extemporaneous

You wouldn't use your slideshow as your notes, would you?!

Research shows when a speaker reads aloud the same text displayed on a slide it interferes with recall. It also annoys and frustrates an audience. That one behaviour not only contributes to your coming across as *wooden*, it also reduces your credibility.

Make your slides a visual feast. Find an emotive photo image and add a single keyword. Move away from slides full of text.

## Cue cards vs. notes

If notes are a safety net, what style of notes are acceptable to an audience without affecting your perception as an authority on your topic?

Full-page size paper allows you to write full sentences and that's ok during preparation. But once you have your written-out text, move to system cards or palm cards. Rewrite your notes as keywords to trigger memory.

## Content vs. process

Have you ever encountered a speaker who, when told they have five minutes remaining, simply speeds up and fire-hoses the content? If a speaker speeds up, will listeners think faster? More likely they'll mentally switch off, waiting for it all to end.

Remember, content is not more important than process. When running out of time, simply draw easily to a natural conclusion, leaving time for Q & A.

## But don't memorise

Delivering off the cuff is not the same as memorising. With memorising, there's a danger again of sounding hollow.

The purpose of being 'in the flow' is to sound natural and appear authentic. It gives you freedom to focus on your audience, make eye contact and connect with the room.

## Master self-talk

How you mentally speak to yourself before you go on has an effect. Observe what you say to yourself, and replace a negative thought, such as 'What if I forget something?' with a positive affirmation such as, 'I know enough to be successful.'

## Action

- Never use full-page size notes. Transfer keywords to cue cards.
- Practice, rehearse, know it so well you can drop cue cards altogether.
- Don't memorise by rote. Navigate intuitively.
- Master self-talk. Tell yourself, 'I know enough to be successful.'

# Why should you open and lead your presentation with more questions?

Do you ask lots of questions when you present? Don't tell; remember to ask instead.

## Why ask questions?

When you ask a question, your audience seeks out the answer in their own minds. The lights literally go on in their brains (brain scans illustrate this). Automatically, your audience is more engaged and actively listening.

'Why is it so?' became a household phrase in Australia and North America from the sixties to the eighties due to Physicist, Professor Julius Sumner Miller's appearances on TV demonstrating intriguing mysteries of physics.

He would ask questions such as:

- How tall a mirror do you need to see all of you?
- What would happen if there were no friction in the world?
- How do waves break?

The Professor's goal was 'to stir interest, awaken enthusiasm, arouse curiosity, kindle a feeling, fire up the imagination.'<sup>2</sup>

Here are some suggestions on how to ask an intriguing question:

1. Instead of going straight in with, '*John P. Kotter says about Change Management...*' preface your statement with a leading question such as, '*What do the experts say?*'

Rather than, '*The Australian Bureau of Statistics report on ...*' you can pose, '*Where can we find evidence for this?*'

2. Instead of assuming: '*I'm sure you read the article this week about ...*' ask, '*Did you see the article this week about . . . ?*'

3. Rather than make an assumption, '*You all know Amazon dot com*', query, '*Who is familiar with Amazon dot com?*'

In any group, it's possible one person is not familiar with something the other 99% are.

4. Instead of telling, '*Here's what you can do*', ask, '*How can you make a difference?*'

## How to start a question

Are you familiar with Rudyard Kipling's poem<sup>3</sup>:

*'I keep six honest serving-men*

*(They taught me all I knew);*

*Their names are What and Why and When*

*And How and Where and Who.'*

These six questions are known as the 'journalist's credo'. In journalism the five Ws (and one H) are regarded as essential to information-gathering.

Use these six words to spice up your presentation with more questions.

## Open with a question

You can capture your audience's attention by opening with a dramatic question:

- *Do you know what's really scary about...?*
- *Have you ever wondered why...?*

## Segue questions

Questions are useful segues—(pronounced 'seg-way')—devices to move a speaker smoothly to the next section or theme of a presentation.

For example:

*Now that I've...[explained how Customer Relationship Management works]... the question remains, [what frequency is just right for staying in touch with clients?]*

## Rhetorical questions

A rhetorical question is asked for effect; an answer is not expected.

When Mark Antony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* asked, 'Was this ambition?', he meant it as a rhetorical question.

Bob Dylan's song 'Blowin' in the Wind' is full of rhetorical questions: 'How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?'

In a presentation, add rhetorical questions.

## Thought-provoking questions

You can conclude your talk with a startling question to get people thinking and talking.

For example:

'Suppose you were given the opportunity to send three small items and a short message in a deep-space probe that might be found by aliens . . . what would you send? What would your message be?'

A question like that will send your listeners on a mental journey seeking the answer.

## Action summary

1. For many of the statements in your presentation, ask yourself, 'How can I restate this as a question?'
2. Identify segue transition points in your presentation and lead into the next section with a question.
3. Can you think of a question that would make a dramatic conclusion?

# What are five common slideshow mistakes?

## Mistake #1. Using the slideshow as an autocue or teleprompter

Have you ever attended a presentation where the speaker actually read from the slides? Did you find it boring or even irritating?

Use cue cards with keywords and rehearse until you know it. Then rely on memory (and your cue cards) to convey your message. Be natural, be conversational, and be human.

## Mistake #2: Too many words per slide

Aim for a maximum of six keywords per slide.

This keeps the font to readable size for those who forgot their glasses. The slides are there to *support* your message, not merely repeat or *be* the message.

## Mistake #3: All text, no visuals

Use slides to reinforce your message with visuals conveying emotion. For example, if you were presenting on pollution, a photo of an oil-covered bird or a city clouded by smog conveys the message emotionally, while you might still discuss EPA data and statistics.

Tip: Use good quality photo library photos rather than clipart. For a small outlay it looks more professional, less 'cheesy'.

## Mistake #4: Using too many transitions, spins, wipes, dissolves

Use transition devices and sound effects sparingly. Less is more.

## Mistake #5: Dimming the lights so your face is in the dark

The purpose of a presentation is to communicate with your audience. People are engaged by eye contact and facial expression. Aim to connect with the people in front of you.

# How to handle Q&A

When presenting to an audience, have you ever arrived at the end of your talk and, almost as an after-thought, asked feebly, 'Any questions?' Perhaps you half-hoped they wouldn't ask any?

## Welcome questions, they're engaging

The biggest mistake presenters make is not allowing enough time for Questions and Answers or 'Q&A'. Often what is asked is what your audience is most interested to know.

Have you ever been to a live musical performance where the encore was actually the best part of the evening? Musicians usually plan what they will play in an encore. Still with 5 or 10 minutes to go is a good time to open up to questions. If it tapers off, you can revert to bonus content, like a planned encore.

But if questions are lively and flowing, that's great. That's exactly what your audience wants or needs to hear. It's what they'll be talking about in the break.

## Have a starter question prepared

One way to get the ball rolling is to remark, 'One question I'm often asked is . . .'

(A speaker tells me they write a starter question on an index card and briefs someone ahead of time to be ready to ask it if there is silence.)

## Give them forewarning

Let them know shortly ahead of time by saying:

'In a few minutes, I'll open the floor to any questions you might have.'

When you arrive at a logical conclusion, use a palms-up gesture and mirror the words you used before: 'And now I'll open up the floor to any questions you might have.' Then pause, and make good eye contact. Look like you expect a question.

## During question-time, here are a few tips:

### 1. Repeat the question

It gives you time to think, to ensure you fully understand the question. And because you are facing them, everyone can catch what was said.

### 2. Take your time

Avoid responding too quickly to questions, even those you readily know the answer. That way you avoid bringing attention to one question difficult to answer compared to others you can answer quickly and easily.

### **3. Good phrase to use**

'That's a good question', gives you time to think, while complimenting the person doing the asking. Remember to use this one time only.

### **4. Get to the point.**

It's better to ask, 'Shall I say more on this?' than go into too much detail.

### **5. How to check understanding**

Avoid asking 'Do you understand?'; it puts the burden of comprehension on the listener. Instead, using 'Does that make sense?' suggests 'Have I explained it well?'

### **A final tip**

It's good practice to repeat the question, in case it was not clearly heard.

Perhaps coach the first questioner, 'Would you be willing to stand to ask your question please?'. Then everyone can hear, and you can see who's doing the talking.



# Do you have a Call to Action at the end of your presentation?

Whenever you present, even if your purpose is to inform rather than persuade or sell, you'll most likely want to connect with your audience.

One way to connect, and perhaps gauge how well your presentation was received, is to have a 'Call To Action' (CTA).

A simple CTA is to offer something free—for example a free report or white paper—to anyone who gives you their business card at the end.

What if they don't have their business card with them?

Perhaps add a post-it note to every handout and ask them to write their name and email address on the post-it to give to you.

You might even be a little creative.

We were consulting with a retail chain prior to their annual conference with franchisees. The goal of the Marketing Manager's presentation was to persuade franchisees to choose one of three opportunities to improve their store and benefit their customers.

We devised a fun way to encourage people to make a commitment.

The presenter ended her talk with, 'Ladies and gentleman. Under your chair you will find three cards, green, purple and orange. The green card corresponds to Opportunity 1, purple card corresponds to Opportunity 2, orange card corresponds to Opportunity 3.

Select the colour card which corresponds to the opportunity you'd like to participate.

Please take it to my assistant, who will exchange it for a sample bag you can take away, filled with all the instructions you need to get started tomorrow.'

## Measure

You can use a Call to Action to measure success. If 20 out of 100 attendees give you their business card, that's a 20% response rate.

If you give the same talk at different locations, you can compare your results over time.

# Self-talk: what do you say to yourself before presenting to an audience?

Does your internal conversation sabotage your confidence just before you present?

Let me tell you a story.

I was a contestant on a national TV Quiz show. New contestants entered the set through sliding doors. Female contestants were accompanied by a male model in a tuxedo. As he and I stood waiting for the doors to slide open, he asked, 'Are you nervous?'

My answer was the positive affirmation I'd been saying to myself over and over like a mantra.

I looked up at him and with a big smile said, 'I feel supremely calm and confident.' (It may sound a little strange out loud, but quietly spoken to myself, it had been comforting and reassuring.)

What do you say to yourself before you present? Find a phrase that resonates with you.

My phrase is 'I feel supremely calm and confident'. What's yours?

## Action

1. Observe your self-talk, i.e. what you say to yourself leading up to and just prior to a presentation.
2. Substitute a negative, self-limiting statement with a positive uplifting one.

## References

Why should you open and lead your presentation with more questions?

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