Guidelines for Preparing *Your* Presentation
by Ron Streicher

Whatever your field of interest, at some time you may be called-upon to present a lecture — it may be about your work, your hobbies, your travels, or whatever. When that time comes, knowing how to prepare and deliver an effective presentation will save you the embarrassment of standing in front of your audience and fumbling with your script, the slides, or even the basic task of organizing your materials effectively.

Following are a few simple guidelines that can help you overcome your "stage fright" and to plan, prepare, and give a successful public presentation.

Planning the Presentation:

These are some of the factors you need to consider when first planning your presentation. Before you can proceed with the development of the presentation itself, you should review and answer the following questions satisfactorily.

1. The primary goal of any presentation is to answer this essential question: *How will the information presented benefit the audience members at or in their: home, work, education, recreation, relaxation, hobbies, finances, daily life, etc.?*
    The following criteria must be considered right from the outset when planning a presentation. If you don't have a clear goal for your lecture, it will be far more difficult to produce a meaningful, logically developed, and clearly focused presentation. (This information also will be helpful to anyone who needs to prepare an announcement of your presentation for their newsletter, website notice, and /or your introduction at the meeting.)
    1.1 What do you, as the presenter, want the audience to "go away with" at the end of your lecture?
    1.2 How do you intend to ensure that this goal is achieved?
    1.3 What level of audience expertise is necessary for them to benefit from the presentation?
        1.3.1 You need to tailor your presentation to suit your audience so that it is neither too simplistic nor too complex. If you cannot determine this in advance, prepare one or two questions to ask at the beginning which will help you know their level of understanding. Also, unless you agree to take questions at any time during your presentation, plan to include regular breaks for "any questions?"

2. Have you given this presentation in the past? If so, how often and when was it last updated? How was it received by previous audiences? What changes can you make that will improve it?
    Every time you address an audience, make mental (or written) notes to yourself as to what worked well and what did not. Before you repeat the presentation, fix those that did not.

3. What will be the format of the presentation?

3.1 Will you be using presentation software, such as Keynote or PowerPoint? If so, is your software version up to date?

3.2 Will you be doing a live demonstration of software? If so, it is important to do a step-by-step demonstration how the basic features of the program work. Remember it is better to explain thoroughly only a few fundamental and essential aspects of a program than to go rapid-fire and/or randomly through everything it can do.

3.2.1 When you demonstrate the software, explain each keystroke and/or menu that you are using so the audience will understand how it works. Don't just "click and go." Take time and ask if they are following you before you proceed.

3.2.2 Be sure to explain what Operating System version, the minimum amount of memory, and any special equipment required for the user to install and operate the software.

3.3 Will this be a hardware product "show and tell?" Demonstrate and explain what can it do and how it does it. Focus on the most important aspects of the hardware; don't get too involved in the small details.

3.3.1 What other equipment, Operating System version, and minimum amount of memory are required for the user to operate this product?

4. What computer and/or support facilities will be required for the presentation?

4.1   Will you be bringing your own computer? If so, be sure to bring any special interface cables required: audio output, video or projector interface, etc.

4.2 If you will be using a "host" computer, in addition to your own files, you should plan to bring an "installation copy" of the application(s) and any special fonts you will be using to present it. Be sure that this application is not copy restricted and remember to have any special authorization codes, serial numbers, etc. that will be needed to complete the installation. Remember also to uninstall all of your files, software, and fonts from the computer following your presentation to avoid any potential copyright violations.

5. Will you have any special projection or audio needs? Check with the facility well enough in advance to confirm that they can obtain whatever equipment will be needed.

5.1 If you are using your own computer, be sure to bring with you any special interface cables (audio and/or video) that will be needed to connect to the "host" equipment. *(If you are using a Macintosh computer, remember to bring your VGA adaptor cable. Most projectors only accept VGA inputs.)*

6. Will you need an active, on-line connection to the Internet? Again, check in advance with the facility to ensure that this will be working and available. Be sure to find out whether this will be a wired (Ethernet) or wireless (WiFi) connection and if any special passwords will be needed. Note that if streamed on-line video or audio content is part of your presentation, the reliability and speed of the on-site Internet connection is critical to the quality of the content. If possible, download or capture this content beforehand so that you are not dependent on an on-site Internet connection.

7. Will you be presenting alone or will others be assisting you? Information about each speaker should be provided to your host or sponsor for their newsletter and website, and to make appropriate introductions at the meeting.

7.1 What is your relationship to the product or topic? Are you an official or paid representative of the company that produced it, or are you an interested user?

7.2 Do you have experience using *and demonstrating* the product or topic? Nothing destroys your credibility faster than fumbling with your product or demonstration while trying to get it to work properly.

8. Plan to keep the meeting and presentation on schedule:

8.1 Rehearse a full run-through of your presentation so that you will know just how much time is required. You may find that you need to shorten or even eliminate some parts of it to fit the available time allotted without being rushed or left incomplete.

8.2 Allow adequate time for Q&A.

8.2.1 Be careful that the Q&A does not degenerate into minutiae or an individual audience-member's detailed problems.

Preparing the presentation:

1. *"A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step."* As noted at the outset, you must know what is the goal of your presentation before you can begin to develop it.

2. Creating text for your slideshow:

2.1 Use easy-to-read fonts. Avoid fancy script fonts entirely, and use *italics* or other special characters sparingly and only for emphasis.

2.1.1 Simple *sans-serif* fonts (such as Arial or Helvetica) are easier to read on screen than *serif* fonts. (Conversely, on the printed page, serif fonts are easier to read.)

2.1.2 Keep the font size large: use 30-point or greater on screen.

2.1.3 Keep the number of lines of text on each slide to a minimum, preferably no more than ten.

2.1.4 Center-justified text is difficult to read. Keep large blocks of text left-justified.

2.1.5 Colored text is good for emphasis, but be certain that it can be read easily against any background colors or images.

2.2 Remember: Unless your slideshow is a "stand-alone" presentation, the text you create for the slideshow should be only *supplemental* and just enough to support what you will be saying to the audience. Your oral presentation should be foremost.

3. Creating graphics for your slideshow: Text tells your audience what you want them to know, but pictures often add emphasis, detail, and clarity.

3.1 Keep each slide simple, but make it graphically interesting. Don't let it become cluttered with too many images or text.

3.2 Using a series or sequence of images (only one per slide) can create a logical flow of ideas, enhance the message, and maintain the interest of the audience.

3.3 Using basic shapes, you can create backgrounds or frames for text or other graphic images to enhance and set them off for emphasis. Be sure, however, that they do not render the primary text or image difficult to read or view.

3.4 You also can use the shapes or drawing tools in your presentation software to create special images to illustrate or emphasize a point you are making.

3.5 An occasional relevant cartoon ("borrowed" from the local newspaper or on-line source) can add emphasis or underscore your message. Do not overdo them, however.

4. Visual effects can spice up the slideshow, but like seasonings in the soup, don't over-do them. If the effects draw attention to themselves, your audience will watch the effects and you lose their attention to the message.

4.1 *Transitions* change from one slide to the next. Most transitions between slides should be simple dissolves, usually 2 to 3 seconds in duration. Other transition effects, such as page-flips, cubes, wipes, etc. also can be used effectively, particularly if employed to signify changes in a topic, section, or the direction of the presentation.

4.2 *Builds* bring text or objects into or out of a slide. Builds are most effective as either dissolves or, in the case of bullet topics, left-to-right moves. Again, these should be between 2 and 3 seconds in duration. Other build effects can be used for emphasis and/or variety, but be careful not to use them to excess.

4.3 Use of special visual effects should be used judiciously: do not use them too often or run them too fast, lest you drive your audience to distraction. Remember, they came to learn about your topic, not to see how clever you can be in creating your slideshow. The medium is *not* the message.

5. *"A good picture is worth a thousand words."* Relevant photographs always add interest and clarity to your presentation. Use them to illustrate the point you are making or add detail to the explanation.

5.1 When you import them, give them a simple but interesting border to offset them from the background.

5.2 Process them off-line to ensure that they will be clear images, with good contrast, color balance, and no visual artifacts or other features that can distract the audience's attention.

6. The Internet and other reference materials can serve as good sources for graphic materials (and excerpts or quotes) for your slideshow. Just remember that anything you "borrow" is likely to be covered under some for of copyright. Using it without permission (or payment) *may* be illegal.

6.1 The "Fair Use Doctrine" however, does allow use of copyright materials for educational purposes, with certain limits and restrictions found in sections 107 through 118 of the U.S. Copyright Act, title 17, U. S. Code:
http://www.copyright.gov/title17/92chap1.html#107

6.2 Whenever you "borrow" material from another source, whether or not it is covered by the "Fair Use Doctrine" it is, at the very least, common courtesy and a moral obligation to give full credit to the author, publisher, creator, or source.

7. Working with sound: Remember the root of the word "Audience."
    7.1 Sound examples, musical backgrounds, etc. can be very effective in creating your presentation and adding interest to your lecture. Whether imbedded into your slideshow or played from an alternate source, however, you need to give proper care to the way you introduce sound to your presentation.
    7.2 Keep the audio levels consistent. You know from your own experience watching television how annoying it is when the program and the commercials are drastically different in volume. When recording audio clips for your presentation, be careful to maintain a consistent level from one segment to the next.
    7.3 When you go to give your presentation, test the playback to ensure that the volume is consistent between the audio tracks and also with the level of your voice as heard by the audience (via the sound system, if any). Your voice should be just slightly louder than the audio playback tracks.
        7.3.1 If you are playing an audio track under your speaking voice, be sure that your words can be heard and understood clearly. If not, then you will need to reduce the playback level accordingly.

Giving your presentation:

All of the best planning and preparation of a your lecture is for naught if the final presentation falls on its face. Here are a few things to consider, and some to avoid, when your show finally goes on stage.

1. First and foremost: REHEARSE your presentation until you can give it without any hesitation, fumbling, or technical difficulties. As noted earlier, nothing will destroy your credibility faster than if you cannot operate the software or hardware or make your slideshow advance properly, or if you stumble over your words or are unclear in your oral presentation.
    1.1 Rehearsals give you an opportunity to discover what does and does not work effectively in your presentation. Ask a friend to watch and critique it for you.
    1.2 Rehearsal also lets you know just how much time is required for any particular segment of the presentation as well as the whole running time. If you need to make adjustments to fit the available time, here is when and where you should do it.

2. Equally important: DO NOT READ YOUR SLIDES. The audience can read them for themselves. Your oral presentation should convey the majority of the information in your presentation; the text on the slides should be only a supplement to what you are saying or showing.
    2.1 Speak in a clear, articulated voice, and do not speak too fast. If your audience cannot understand what you are saying, then there is no meaning to your lecture.
    2.2 Whenever possible, use a good sound system so that everyone in the room will be able to hear you clearly. This way you will not need to shout, making your speech more intelligible and saving your voice from wearing thin before your are finished.

3. Mute your own cell phone and pager. It is disrespectful to your audience to interrupt your presentation to answer your phone or pager. However, you should use your own best judgment as to whether or not to ask the audience to mute theirs. (For example, even if this will be a lecture to a group of on-call doctors, you can ask them to switch their phones and/or pagers to the vibrate or silent mode.)

4. Go to the bathroom before you go on stage to give your presentation. This may seem obvious, but …

5. As noted earlier (Planning your presentation, sections 4, 5, and 6), if you will rely on a projector, sound system, or Internet connection for your slideshow, determine in advance if everything you need will be installed, working, and available at the time of your presentation.
    5.1 If you need a projector, make sure that they have a good one (and a screen) available, and what connector(s) are required to interface it with your computer.
    5.2 Bring any and all necessary interface cables with you. Do not trust that they will have them there – especially if you need special cables (such DVI/D or mini-DVI to VGA adaptors required by Macintosh portable computers).
    5.3 If you travel with your own projector, be sure to have a spare lamp with you.
        5.3.1 A camera tripod makes an excellent and versatile support for your projector; it can adjust for height and minimize the need for keystone adjustments.
    5.4 If you will be using the venue's Internet connection, determine if you will need any special passwords or other access codes.
    5.5 If you do a lot of lecturing, it is worthwhile to purchase your own head-worn microphone and carry it with you. This will make your voice much clearer and intelligible than almost anything the venue is likely to have on hand.
        5.5.1 A good choice is the Countryman E-6 phantom-powered unit. If you do purchase this or any microphone, however, check in advance whether their sound system can work with your microphone; it will need to provide the appropriate "phantom power" required to operate the microphone.
    5.6 Never connect the headphone (or other audio output) from your computer directly to the house sound system. Always use a transformer isolator to protect you from possible damage from their equipment.
        5.6.1 A decent and inexpensive unit is the "Hum Eliminator" available from Ebtech Electronics: *http://www.ebtechaudio.com*
        5.6.2 Higher quality isolation transformers are the "IsoMax" series, available from Jensen Transformers: *http://www.jensen-transformers.com/iso_aud.html*
        5.6.3 You will need an appropriate set of adaptor cables to interface your computer to the input of the transformer box:
            5.6.3.1: mini-stereo phone to RCA plugs cable, Radio Shack #42-250
            5.6.3.2: two RCA jack to phone plug adaptors, Radio Shack #274-320

6. Maintain proper electrical safety when connecting to other audio and/or video equipment. Everything should be connected to the same AC power strip whenever possible. Also be sure that none of the equipment has had the round grounding pin removed from the AC plug. This pin is there to protect you and the other equipment in

the event of a ground fault within the system. If the ground pin has been removed, there is a potential risk of a serious electrical shock hazard.

7. Purchase and use a wireless presentation controller. If your computer does not have its own wireless remote control, many third-party units are available that will provide you the freedom to walk around and change your slides without having to return to the computer every time. Most of these also have a laser pointer feature.

8. Plan to arrive at the venue well enough in advance to setup and test all of your equipment, as well as your presentation and demonstrations, before the audience arrives. This is your "trouble-shooting" opportunity; it is best to do this without the pressure or embarrassment of the audience watching you or waiting for you to start.

9. Create a "test" slide that you can use to adjust the projector and sound system while setting up for your presentation.
    9.1 You can find a number of video test patterns by searching on the phrase "test pattern" on Google.
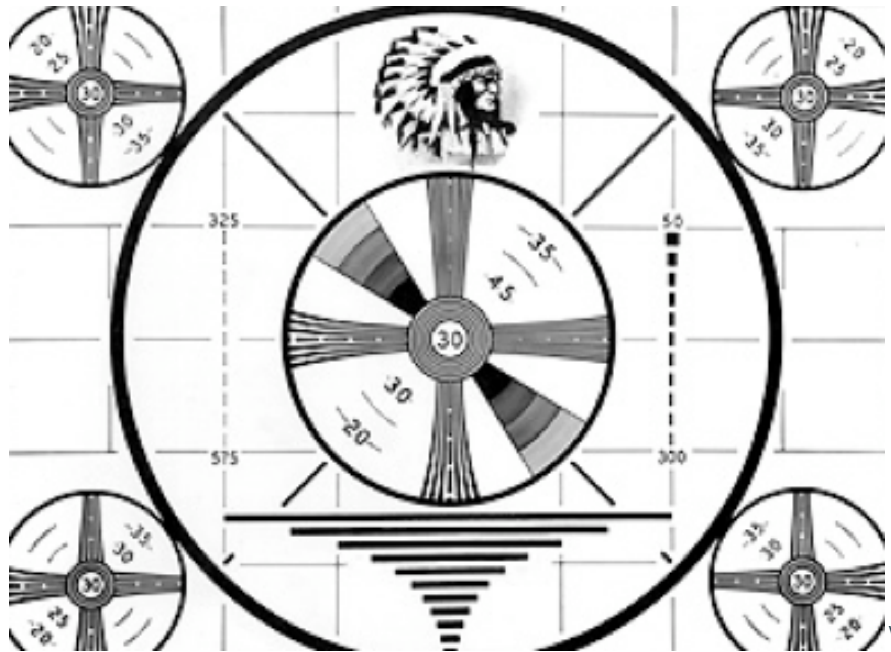
    9.2 Audio test signals can be imbedded with the test pattern slide to enable you to test the playback system from your computer. These should include left/right channel identification, left/right balance, and left/right phase coherence.
        9.2.1 One source for downloadable test signals can be found at:
    http://www.testaudio.com/testaudio/products.asp
        9.2.2 For other options, search Google for "audio test signals."
    9.3 If your audio presentation requires decent stereo playback, the loudspeakers should be located immediately left and right of the screen, and above ear-level of the audience. Use your test signals to confirm that the playback is correct.

10. Whenever possible, setup your podium to the audience-left of the projection screen. People are accustomed from looking from left-to-right, so this will direct your audience's attention first to you; then you can transfer it to the screen.

11. Viewing the screen is best done if the lights directly over and in front it are turned off. The other lights in the room, however, should be left on and dimmed (if possible) to allow people to take notes.

 12. Always carry a backup of your presentation (and presentation software) with you on a separate portable drive. Remember, there are two kinds of computer users — those who have had a hard-drive crash, and those who haven't … yet!

13. Allow sufficient time both within and following your presentation for Q&A. Both your audience and you always learn from these exchanges.

14. Have fun! If you are not enjoying giving your presentation, the audience will not enjoy hearing it.