

A Great Teller of Tales

By Tom Grzesiak, Global Knowledge Instructor

Your ability to make outstanding presentations is one of the most critical skills you possess. It enables you to affect the people around you and inspire action from your audience. You use this skill to make sales calls, train staff, and ask for a raise. But making a presentation is, for most of us, an unusual form of communication. If only there was a magic wand that could be waved, or some formula we could use, that would always ensure a successful presentation.

Unfortunately the magic wand and formula don't exist because when you think about it, every presentation is different. Even if you are presenting the same content multiple times, each new audience has different requirements, and you as the presenter bring something different to each performance. But there are principles that you can apply to preparing and delivering a great presentation that gets your message across every time.

The first principle you can apply is STRUCTURE. Think of your favorite movie. There is a classical structure to it, used since before Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. It is The Setting, The Elaboration, and The Solution. Don't forget that as a presenter, you are telling a story, and this structure helps to make your story compelling to your audience.

THE SETTING

In your favorite movie, think about what happens at the beginning. My favorite movie is *The Godfather*, which opens with the wedding scene. Here we meet the members of the "family" and they grab our attention, making us curious about what will happen to them next. This is The Setting. In your presentations, this is where you will introduce the characters (the key stakeholders) and the business problem to be solved.

It is also where you want to get your audience's attention, either with a bang or a gentle setting of the scene. Be creative and try to do something out of the ordinary early in your presentation. You could make a controversial statement, purposely challenge your audience's expectations, or unveil a dynamic presentation aid. The goal here is for each member of the audience to think *this presentation is important to me, I want to be here, and I cannot wait to see and hear more.*

You first need to understand your audience before you can grab their attention. Put yourself in their shoes. What are their expectations? Even if you know the audience personally it is good practice to review their expectations: are they waiting to be persuaded, informed, or being asked to make a decision?

Also determine their level of interest. Are the members of the audience truly interested in the subject of the presentation, or have they been forced to attend? For the latter, you will need to create the interest.

THE ELABORATION

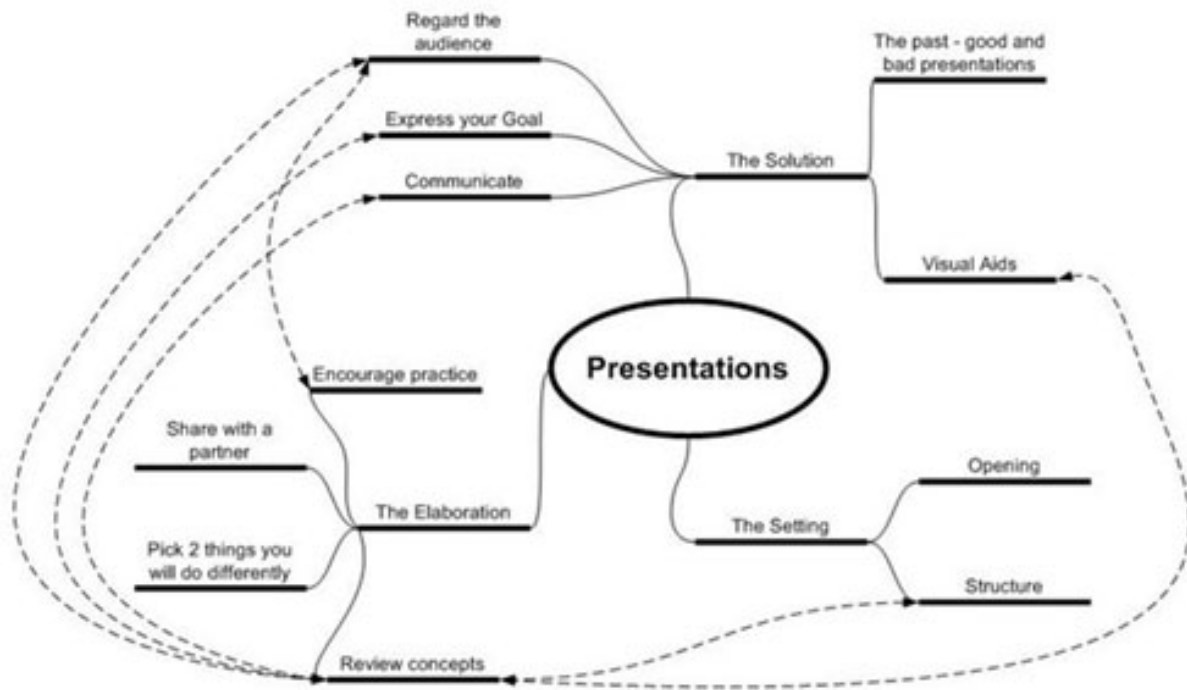
The second part of your presentation is The Elaboration. Here you reveal the tension and detail about the business problem. Make sure you keep your audience involved. Describe the severity of the problem or explain what would happen to different members of the audience if the problem is not solved. For a complacent audience, you will want to create visual aids that drive home your message.

The role you play in the problem-solving situation will dictate your style in this part of the presentation. If you have a non-directive role, you could act as an objective observer and raise questions for reflection. Or you could be a process counselor and observe the problem-solving process and provide feedback. If you have a more directive role, you could be a joint problem solver, offering alternatives and participating in the decision making. The extreme directive role would be that of an advocate. Here you would use your power and influence to move your audience in the direction you desire.

THE SOLUTION

The final part of your story is The Solution. Here you conclude the presentation by proposing how the problem will be resolved, the next steps for the characters, and what the future will look like. Think about how you feel when your favorite movie is over. Do you feel joy, relief, or inspiration? Here is where your presentation should offer a call for action, creating the emotions you want your audience to leave with. Just as you created an opening that pulled in the audience, you have to be inventive and create a theatrical climax. You can use the techniques described earlier in The Setting, or create your own. Do not let your ending be inconclusive; a definitive ending will compel the audience to feel passionate about the solution and the future.

The Brainstorming Diagram is a tool you can use to take all the ideas you have for a presentation and organize them into this structure. Begin with a single idea in a circle or box, and then add branches with other sub-ideas. You can add lines to create linkages between the different ideas you want to make in your presentation. Here is a simple example of a brainstorming diagram for a presentation about making effective presentations.



The master presenter Winston Churchill once said: "Of all the talents bestowed upon men, none is so precious as the gift of oratory. He who enjoys it wields a power more durable than that of a great king."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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