Simple steps to successful presentations

By [Shannon Alter](#) on May 10th, 2013 |
http://smartblogs.com/leadership/2013/05/10/simple-steps-to-successful-presentations/

Picture this: You're at a conference, waiting to hear a speaker whose talk you've been looking forward to for months. As you sit down, you realize that he appears rattled and is gripping onto the lectern for dear life. He begins to talk, ever so slowly.

You wait a while to see if his talk improves but it becomes decidedly boring. Now you're dreaming of a coffee break. If this sounds familiar (or if you've been in that position), there's hope. No matter whether you're presenting to an audience of one or to a crowd of 100, these tried-and-true tips will ensure you're ready to roll the next time you present.

1. **Start with a bang.** During last year's Tropical Storm Isaac, I was rerouted on my less-than-favorite airline. All went smoothly, at least until I emerged from the plane, uh, bitten. I was a little panicked upon discovering that a few sneaky little critters had apparently been my seatmates, and airline personnel were, well, unconcerned. What did this get me? A great opener for future talks on customer service, to be sure. Get started by thinking about the everyday things you do. Grab your audience's interest with a story, quote or an interesting bit of information at the start and they'll stay with you for the long run. It works every time.
2. **Get focused.** You've gotta start somewhere, and every plan needs a roadmap. To stay on track, outline, outline, outline. Decide first what your message is, why your audience wants to hear it, and how you will reinforce it. Then determine how you'll sequence your thoughts: for a 30-minute talk, having four or five main points is ideal. Consider using an outline composed of talking points; jot down keywords as reminders of what you want to discuss. I like to use a whiteboard; it allows me to see all of my ideas at once, giving me a better picture of my story. You can use paper, index cards or your smartphone, but do it.
3. **Know your audience.** Who are you there to talk to? Whether you're talking to a potential client, a team of employees or a huge group, knowing what your audience is looking for can make a world of difference.
4. **Know your stuff.** Unless you're an expert at improvisation (or your name is Jerry Seinfeld), don't depend on winging it. Your ship will sink faster than the Titanic if you don't know your material backwards and forwards. Do your homework and make sure your material is solid before you get in front of the crowd.
5. **Weave in examples.** Think of examples as the golden thread that will tie your presentation together. People want to learn from your experiences. It's much more valuable if you can use stories or examples to illustrate and support your points. They want to hear about what has worked and what hasn't worked. Try it, and see how your topic comes to life!
6. **Don't read.** Have you ever seen a presenter read every slide? Nothing can kill a speech or meeting faster than if you read your material. People can do that for themselves. It's your job to fill in what's between the lines and tell them the real story.
7. **Have a Plan B.** When I first spoke overseas, I was at the mercy of my host. He alone had my presentation slides on a CD and he alone was late. He finally arrived and I gleefully popped the CD into my laptop, anticipating my first slide on management. Instead, out came Russian folk music. It's true; you just can't make this stuff up. What were my lessons learned? Always carry a duplicate of your presentation. Things can, and do, go sideways at the most inopportune times — a delayed client, a missing audio visual guy, even a power outage. Decide in advance what you'll do if something does go amiss. No matter whether you're presenting a proposal for new business or preparing for a panel, having a backup plan pays off.

Shannon Alter is president of Alter Consulting Group where she helps managers and companies succeed by developing the skills they need to provide client solutions