



Overcoming Bad Presentation Habits

Have you ever been in a presentation where you follow along for five minutes as the presenter reads directly from PowerPoint slides, and then you spend the next 40 minutes working from your cell phone that you try to hide under the table? We're all guilty of tuning out, wasting our own time and the presenter's.

Here's the good news: Presentations can be better and bad habits can be overcome.

Bad presentation habits can detract from the overall message, and make the presenter seem disorganized, nervous or worse, lacking in content knowledge. Overcoming bad habits can help focus the audience on what the presenter says, not just how information is conveyed.

Your first step in overcoming bad habits is to **be aware of how you are perceived by others**. Determine what your bad habits are and then work on breaking them! One way to do this is to use an audio or video recorder and watch and/or listen to your presentation. Pay close attention for common bad habits and ask others colleagues for feedback. An honest assessment is critical to breaking habits that can get in the way of a great presentation.

Practice, practice, practice! Practice with your friends or family, or in front of a mirror. The more you practice the more aware you will be of your habits, so you can take steps to fixing the bad ones and improving upon the good ones.

See the list on the next page for common habits for presenters and how to address them.

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Habit	Description	How to Address It
Reading your presentation	Reading from your notes makes your voice sound scripted and monotone. Though looking at your notes for detail is OK, do not read directly from the notes. Speak on what you know.	Practice out loud. Stand in front of a mirror or practice with your friends and family. When you say the words out loud, the content will more easily flow and it will not sound as scripted.
Not making eye contact and face your audience	When presenters look at slides, the wall, notes, etc. rather than the audience, they don't gain audience's trust. When you do this, you lose the audience's attention.	Speak to the audience, not the slides. Try to make eye contact 90% of the time. Never turn your back on the audience to read the slides. If necessary, take a quick glance at the screen or your notes, but be sure to keep your focus on your audience.
Fidgeting	Fidgeting with your hands, jiggling coins or swaying back and forth all reflect nervousness or insecurity and can be distracting.	Videotape yourself and practice speaking without fidgeting. Practice where you will stand and where you will put your hands. Practice being intentional about your gestures, without looking too stiff.
Relying on bullets in the presentation	When the presenter reads bullets on slides without providing additional context or background, it diminishes the role of the presenter. Slides should never be used to store your presentation notes.	Reduce the content on each slide. Assume your audience can read the slides and do not read each point. Instead, provide context and background that helps the audience fully absorb and remember the point. Try to integrate pictures that can make your point. Audiences will remember the visual easier than the words.
Standing stiffly (AKA dinosaur arms)	Stiff presenters stand in one spot or stiffly move their arms. Some presenters make hand gestures from their forearm only, while the upper arm is tightened against the body. Standing stiffly makes the presenter appear nervous.	Practice moving around while speaking, and watch yourself in a mirror to get used to different hand movements. Pay attention to your hand movements. Good communicators engage with their body movements, as well as with their voice.
Speaking too long	Long-winded presentations, taking 5 minutes to make a point that could have been made in 1 minute—can bore or confuse the audience.	Review your talking points. Can you be more concise and direct in your language?
Speaking too quickly	Sometimes when there is a lot of material to cover, presenters speak too fast to get through it all. It's hard for the audience to follow and could make the presenter sounds nervous.	Cut the presentation down. Think about the 2–3 most critical points and cover those first. If you are nervous, write cues to yourself in your notes, such as “Slow Down” or “Breathe.” Include pauses to allow for important content to sink in.
Speaking too slowly or softly (low energy)	When the presenter uses a slow or low voice, or does not express with body language, the audience is likely to tune out, regardless of whether the content is engaging or not.	Increase your energy level. Practice being expressive and natural with your body movements. Practice projecting your voice and appropriate intonations.

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Using fillers (like, um, clearing throat)	Everyone does this to some extent, although some presenters are more egregious than others. Using fillers can distract from your content and the audience may perceive you as unknowledgeable or nervous.	Become aware of your speaking rhythms. Record yourself in different situations to understand when you most often use fillers. Slow down and practice pausing instead of using filler.
Being unaware of monotone or intonation	Using a monotone voice or an upward intonation at the end of sentences (making a statement sound like a question) can put the audience to sleep, be distracting, or reduce the credibility of the content and/or the presenter.	Be aware of the intonation in your voice. Practice out loud and concentrate on keeping your tone consistent and placing emphasis appropriately.
Data dumping	Using data or statistics is a great way to illustrate a point. But often presenters rely too heavily on charts, graphs or statistics, and lose the audience in the details. Detailed data charts can be confusing and too heavy to go through in a presentation.	Use data to illustrate a point, and then move to the “so what” or why it matters to the audience. Some charts and graphs are best left to papers. Connect with the audience and keep them inspired by focusing on a main idea and next steps.
Dressing inappropriately	Great communicators look the part. If what you’re wearing catches and keeps your audience’s eye, it will ultimately distract from your presentation.	Always dress appropriately for your audience and your topic. Avoid distracting accessories. When in doubt, neutral business professional attire will always work. Remember to always check your appearance – lipstick on teeth, shirt unbuttoned, etc., can easily be avoided. If you are going on camera, be aware of the background. Avoid loud printed clothing.
Ending your presentation without inspiration	An audience will be let down if they hear great information but are not left with a way to take the ideas to action.	End on an inspiring note, whether it is recapping the important points or inviting your audience to take action. Most listeners will walk away from a presentation remembering what was said at the end. Always rehearse and prepare for the end of your presentation. Summarize key points and leave the audience with something memorable.
Being inflexible and irrelevant	Sometimes a particular point in a presentation will spark your audience’s interest; they will want to spend more time discussing a single point and it will throw the timing for the rest of the presentation off.	Relate back to your audience. Don’t speed through content in order to stay on your timetable; summarize your point and relate it to what the audience thinks is most important. Know what your objectives are going into the presentation so you touch on your most important points, but stay flexible. Connecting to your audience will make your presentation more memorable.



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Not knowing your audience	Often audiences come to a room with different levels of understanding or comfort with issues.	Take time before and after your presentation to get to know your audience, ask questions and learn who they are. During your presentation, try to engage as many individuals as possible. Make sure to tailor content to the audience's level of understanding. Personal touches make individuals feel relevant within the crowd.
Chewing gum	Like in school or riding a bike, just don't do it!	
Not sticking to your message	If you get off topic, or you're trying to convey too much information or you haven't thought through your points, it is easy for the audience to become confused. As a presenter it is easy to get off-message when questions are asked or someone introduces new information.	Write your messages down and practice them out loud. Messages should communicate who you are, what you do, why it matters and why others should care. These points should be integrated throughout a presentation. Always incorporate your core and audience-specific messaging so it builds brand.
Using jargon	Sometimes when presenters get comfortable with content or an audience it is easy to start speaking in shorthand or to use acronyms. "Insider" language can lose audience members who may not know what it means.	Remove all jargon or "insider" language and acronyms. If the audience is not familiar with the topic, make sure to include a lot of examples and context.
Not practicing active listening and answering questions as best as you can.	Active listening can provide clues to areas your audience is interested in or wants to hear additional information. If you give the audience the floor to ask questions or to comment, let them finish.	Use active listening skills to answer the question as best as you can. If you cannot answer the question, say so and follow up afterwards.
Not taking care of yourself	It is never fun to present when you are not feeling well. But sometimes you do not have a choice. Sneezing, coughing and sniffing can be distracting.	Prepare with plenty of water and tissues, take a cough drop or medicine before speaking, and use hand sanitizer so germs don't distract people.
Not learning to pivot	When someone asks a difficult question, the presenter can either stumble or take control of the conversation.	Take control of the conversation by practicing transitions and pivoting back to your core message.