

How to Rock Your Presentation. Avoid these top 10 mistakes.

By Cathey Armillas, DTM

Funny thing about people. We try to avoid pain more than we strive for gain. Most people tend to focus on the negative rather than the positive. I believe that's the reason why the number one question I get when coaching clients to give a TED Talk is: "What am I doing wrong?" rather than "What am I doing right?"

Let's talk about pain for a minute. A lot of people struggle with the pain of public speaking. Where does that pain come from? It's a fear of feeling vulnerable in front of other people. Would we feel as vulnerable if we knew we could execute a presentation flawlessly? No. We are afraid of making mistakes and looking silly. What if we could avoid that pain by learning from the most common and often simple mistakes that we all make.

As a TED coach and an executive speaker coach, I spend much of my time researching and incorporating the psychology of audience engagement and interaction into my work. I teach clients how to create talks, speeches, and presentations that aren't awful, because no one wants to be awful. The goal isn't to avoid it; it's to rock every speech, presentation, or talk we give.

But, how do we do that?

Mistakes We Make the Most

The quickest way to a boring presentation that lacks creativity is to allow yourself to fall into the common pitfalls you have undoubtedly witnessed firsthand. It's easier to scarcely prepare than to roll up your sleeves and work hard to deliver a unique and polished presentation.

Let's start with the "no-no's." There are many cliché habits we imitate in our presentations because we've seen and heard them before. How many times have you heard one of the following: "*And without further ado...*" "*Let me start by thanking the organizers for having me here today.*" "*Thank you for your time, I'm honored to be here with you.*"

Not that any of these sayings are bad—they aren't. They're just overused and expected. As a speaker, you can assert your power, and ultimately influence, by working a little harder to be original.

I have coached a wide variety of speakers: from a rap singer to a World War II veteran, from CEOs to TED speakers and Toastmasters World Champions. I've watched, analyzed, and reverse-engineered oh-so-many presentations. I started compiling a list of the most common mistakes that people make. Of course, I won't just leave you with a list of no-no's. I'm a coach. I'll also tell you what you can do to rock it instead.

Here are the top 10 mistakes that can dull down and suck the "wow" out of any presentation, followed by ways to turn the mistakes into wins.

1 Inf overwhelm

Don't overwhelm your audience with too much information. There's only so much they can process at once. They don't need hordes of data to get behind what you're saying. They need the right amount of information with the right angle.

How to rock it:

Be selective about the information you use and tailor it to your audience needs, not to your own expertise or comfort level.

2 Being audience ignorant

There are many ways we can be audience ignorant, particularly when we present information that doesn't match the interest or maturity level of our audience. Leaders want the 30,000-foot view while analysts love to get into the weeds. Colleagues in your field might want to see your work, while a potential client might want to just hear the conclusions. Don't be oblivious to what your audience cares about.

How to rock it:

Figure out the best way to connect with your audience by focusing on what they care about. Put yourself in their place. There's always an invisible wall between you and the audience. It's your job to recognize it's there and bring it down.

3 The slow start

Have you ever heard a presentation start where it takes a while before the speaker gets to the point? Slow starts are terrible. You should always open strong and grab the interest of your audience immediately.

How to rock it:

A great way to open is to ask an intriguing question or make a shocking statement. Do something that will instantly capture and retain the attention of the audience. One caveat, though: Don't do something just to do it. Make sure that your opening ties strongly to the ideas, points, and call-to-action you will be presenting.

4 Over-explaining

Have you ever heard someone tell a story and they go on and on and on and on? By the time they were done, you asked yourself, "What was the point of that?" Or, they explain an idea or concept and give more information than what was needed.

How to rock it:

Keep your stories and explanations as short as they can be. Do more engaging and less explaining. If you pay close attention to the reaction of your audience, you'll know when you're over-explaining.

5 Sameness

Most people can't handle listening to someone who doesn't have variety in their delivery of a presentation. In other words, sameness. If you sound the same throughout your speech, the audience will stop paying attention. The same of anything gets boring.

How to rock it:

Be aware of how you sound and your audience's reaction. Add variety to everything—pace, vocal range, volume, and even the emotions you inject. Take your audience on a captivating journey where nothing stays the same. This will keep them tuned in the entire time.

6 Ending on Q&A

Never end on audience questions. You have no control over what's being asked, so a question coming out of left field could derail your whole message and change the energy in the room. That's not how you want to close, so don't gamble on someone else's question.

How to rock it:

Do the old radio show trick. When you get close to the end of your presentation, set the audience up with a teaser of something for them to look forward to at the end, then launch into the Q&A, before shifting gears into an impactful and memorable close.

7 Going over time

The cardinal sin in public speaking is going over time. It's not enough to stay within your allotted time. Pace yourself so you don't end up on slide seven out of 30 with a few minutes to go. A great way to derail a presentation is to make the audience feel anxious as you race to beat the clock.

How to rock it:

Internalize your presentation. If you know it backward and forward, you can easily cut something out on the spot. Improvise to make an "emergency landing." Do whatever you have to so the audience feels they got what they needed rather than feeling their time was wasted.

8 Dreadful visuals

There is no such thing as a neutral visual—it's either adding or taking value away. If a visual is tied to a point or story in a powerful way, it can be extremely effective. If a visual is boring or cliché, then part of your presentation is as well. Avoid clip art (pre-made images for a variety of mediums), stock photography, or slides with too many words.

How to rock it:

Find the visual that will connect your audience emotionally to what you're saying. If you're telling a story about how your grandma used to make homemade ravioli, don't show a stock photo of a plate of ravioli. Show us a picture of your grandma, or even better, one of her making ravioli.

9 I before you

Many presenters make their stories all about them. Yawn. Do you want your audience to tune out? If so, make your presentation all about you. If not, then don't.

How to rock it:

Here's a useful exercise: Count how many times you say the word "I" and how many times you say the word "you" during your presentation, then flip your wording. For example, change "I went to the store at 2 a.m. because I was craving my favorite ice cream" to "Have you ever gone to the store at 2 a.m. because you were craving your favorite ice cream?" When you use the word "you," it makes your audience put themselves into your story. They would rather think about themselves than hear you ramble on about what you did or what you think. Keep the I/you balance tipped more toward them than you.

10 The weak finish

The last thing that you say is the most important. At the end of your presentation, what do you want to leave your audience with? Do you want them to do something, change something, or think differently about

something? Your biggest opportunity for a strong call to action is at the end. The mistake many people make is ending weak. I've always thought that ending with a "thank you" is just a lazy way to say, "My presentation is over." Find a better way.

How to rock it:

Think of your ending like a closing argument. Whatever you want your audience to do, think, or feel, make that apparent in your closing. Create an ending that will be so compelling and so obvious that the audience doesn't need the cue of "thank you" to know you are finished.




1 **TMI (TOO MUCH INFO)**
Overloading on data or just too much information. Blah! Blah! Blah!
HOW TO ROCK IT
Use less information, more stories and a honed focus on your idea.



2 **DREADFUL VISUALS**
Using too few or poor visuals.
HOW TO ROCK IT
Use inspiring and relevant visuals that will help your audience remember. Visuals don't have to be slides.




3 **SAMENESS**
Using the same vocal variety and/or the same emotional level of your presentation.
HOW TO ROCK IT
Change it up to bring the audience up and down; and interested.




4 **GOING OVER TIME**
Not being within the specified time limits and holding the audience captive.
HOW TO ROCK IT
Make sure to stay within your allocated time, even if you have to cut short.



5 **DARTING EYES**
Letting your eyes jump all over and not making enough genuine eye contact to connect with the audience.
HOW TO ROCK IT
Hold steady eye contact from person to person while being intentional about looking over the entire audience and not being robotic.



6 **ENDING ON Q&A**
Ending on Q&A is boring and diminishes the control you have to close out strong.
HOW TO ROCK IT
Do your Q&A towards the end but then finish with a powerful point or call to action.




7 **TALKING TOO MUCH**
Talking non-stop and not engaging the audience, or even worse: reading your slides!
HOW TO ROCK IT
Use interactive and engaging content with well-placed pauses to keep your audience's attention.



8 **USING CLIPART**
There's nothing that screams "rookie" more than clipart and stock photos.
HOW TO ROCK IT
Use original and interesting visuals that will help the audience make connections to your content. Visuals should add to your story not take away.



9 **I BEFORE YOU**
Using too many "I statements" in your presentation and not enough "you statements".
HOW TO ROCK IT
Keep the I/you balance tipped towards your audience.



10 **THE WEAK FINISH**
The end is the last thing your audience hears from you. Don't end on thank you or something weak.
HOW TO ROCK IT
End with a strong call to action or thought-provoking statement.



Advice from the Experts—In 6 Words

One of the creative exercises I do with clients when helping them find and express their big idea is the **six-word story game**. I ask them to clarify their idea in six words. While not easy, it is valuable for them to distil their idea into a simple, digestible concept. I asked some of my favorite clients and colleagues to try that exercise to emphasize their biggest presentation no-no's. I hope their stories inspire you.

Speak with more heart. Less information.

—*Xiomara Torres, Multnomah County (Oregon) circuit court judge and TEDxPortland speaker*

No inauthentic gestures. Sincerely express emotion.

—*Darren LaCroix, 2001 Toastmasters World Champion of Public Speaking*

Reciting every scripted word sounds disingenuous.

—*Marc Williams, 2014 Toastmasters World Championship of Public Speaking™ finalist*

Talk to them, not at them.

—*Allison Clarke, Certified Speaking Professional/past president of National Speakers Association, Oregon*

The stage is sacred, act accordingly.

—*Lou Radja, TEDxSalem (Oregon) international speaker, trainer, coach*

Transcend Ego. Deepen heart. Cultivate spirit.

—*Mary Cheyne, 2009 World Championship of Public Speaking second-place winner*

Don't impress them, impress UPON them.

—*Mark Brown, 1995 World Champion of Public Speaking*

Be brave and forget the script.

—*Emma McIlroy, CEO of Wildfang/TEDxPortland, speaker*

Perform for them not for you.

—*Ben Kenyon, speaker and National Basketball Association performance coach for Portland Trail Blazers*

Be brilliant. Your audience has Google.

—*Courtney McEachern, brand director, NA Nike Direct Stores*

From: <https://www.toastmasters.org/magazine/magazine-issues/2020/oct/how-to-rock-your-presentation>