A Primer on The Art of Presentations:
By Al Johnson

All of us will make a presentation in the course of our adult life. It may be a presentation to your peers at a professional meeting or a report on a project to higher management. This primer will explore the What, Where, Why, When, and How to make that presentation successful. It will cover the subjects of personal dress and demeanor, material preparation, audio/visual equipment that may be needed, the meeting room environment, and finally result expectations.

Material Preparation
The purpose of this paper is not to critique your written material. That is entirely up to you. But it is important to address some of the concerns about the slides that accompany your presentation. It is also assumed that you are not making a canned presentation with voice overlay that indexes to the next at a fixed slide time. If you are speaking and using slides to supplement your presentation, do not use a computer program that indexes automatically. Advance your slides manually.

The background design of your slide should be chosen with care and used for all the slides. PowerPoint provides many slide designs, but should not detract from the principle thrust of your remarks. It should enhance the visual impact of your presentation which may include graphs, figures, and images. Keep in mind that we are all visually oriented and the lack of visuals can make your presentation dull. The slide’s design needs to take this into account. Dozens of designs are available, but you may decide that no design fits your subject.

Here are two very different designs. In a small view, the font size might not appear large enough. Be sure to try the slide on the projection screen before making a final decision.
Of the above two examples, the first is superior as the second contains a “banner” on the left that is not only distracting, but has no connection to the subject matter. Also, the font at the bottom of the second illustration may be too small. Care must be taken to assure the readability of the projected image is adequate when viewed from the back of the room. Among the many designs try to find one that compliments your subject.

Your presentation might be better served with a plain background, like this. It might serve as acceptable if your presentation has numerous charts, graphs, and/or photographs. Again, be alert to the fact that a plain background could become dull.
The text and the background colors should be chosen carefully so there is sufficient contrast to allow easy reading of your slide from the back of the room.

As you can see in this example, a white background and a light blue text color is not acceptable. However, a light blue background with a rich, red text color works well. Experiment until you find a combination which is not only pleasing to the eye but of sufficient contrast. Experiment further with “shadow” on the text. It may add to the desired effect.

Stay with the combination of slide design, text color, background color, and shadow for all your slides!

Create a Title slide that has the title of your talk, your name, and contact information. This slide can remain on the projection screen during the introduction of you as the speaker.

As you prepare each slide, make the text font of sufficient point size as to be easily readable from the back of the room. You may find that 24 point font is the minimum size you should use. Pick a font that is pleasing and stay with that font for the majority of all the slides. Use underlines and bold font sparingly. Don’t try to make a “gee whiz” presentation with many, many different fonts with italics, bold, and underlined talking points.

**Do not read your slides.** Assume that your audience knows how to read. Pick a word or two from your line of thought and make that a bullet point in the slide. The rest should be put into the “Notes” section. Read from your notes to develop your thoughts. Try to minimize your glances at the screen. There will be occasions when a chart or photograph is included in your slide which may mean that you will have to turn to the screen and make sure that your audience is following your thought. Moving over to the screen to accentuate your point lets your audience move their focus around. Practice with your laser pointer so that you are not jiggling in excess.
Practice using your laptop as your cue for what is on the projection screen. They are always the same.

Use animation so that each line of your text appears one at a time, and you can elaborate on each bullet point. If you place all of your bullet points on one slide at the same time, your audience will read ahead of you and will not listen attentively, as you expound on each point.

**Dress and demeanor**
Aside from meeting people for the first time, have you ever taken note of a good handshake? Perhaps the first impression you give as a presenter will depend on that one little social grace. You should be neither a knuckle breaker nor a wet dead fish. You are there to advance your ideas, so look into their eyes and listen carefully for their name. If necessary ask them to repeat it. Try to make a mental picture of the person to establish a connection between that person and their name. Say it to yourself several times to help you remember. Repeating it to them at a later date could make a significant impact on your future. This is particularly true if the one you are shaking hands with might be the lead person at your presentation.

Dress code is not a constant. Your dress should conform to the norm of the group you are about to address. If you stand out from that norm, your audience may spend too much thought-time on how you are dressed rather than paying attention to your presentation. Generally, as a presenter being slightly more formally dressed will serve you well. If you know how your audience dresses, then dress in the same style as your audience. If you make a presentation to the Board of Directors of your company, you may want to find out what dress code is appropriate. Don’t get caught unprepared.

**Meeting Room**
The elements of the meeting room are: chairs for your audience, a podium behind which you will make your presentation, a P/A including a microphone and an amplifier, a projection screen, a digital projector, and your laptop with your material. Be sure that your laptop cable can reach the projector. In the event you must use a different laptop, be sure to have your presentation on your own USB flash drive. If possible, it is a good idea to go to the room and try the projection system.

You may not have any control over the placement of the chairs, the podium with the microphone, or the loud speaker. But know what the layout is before you arrive for your presentation.

**Audio/Visual**
Try to get to the meeting well before your allotted time. You should be all ready to go when the meeting is called to order. Making adjustments to any of the elements when the audience is present reflects sloppy preparation. At most scientific meetings, talks run consecutively on 10 to 30 minute intervals. Thus, it is hard to avoid adjustments on some occasions.
Hopefully you will be provided with a lapel microphone so that as you move about the podium, the sound level remains constant. If not, do not adjust the audio gain with your face near the microphone. Stand normally at a comfortable distance from your notes, speak in your normal voice, and have others adjust the sound level so that your voice can be heard comfortably for all those present. Practice talking into a microphone. Don’t hold it so close to your mouth that the sound of your breathing is heard. Hold it just below or to the side of your mouth. Be sure the amplifier gain is set so that you can hear your own voice in the loud speaker.

If the microphone picks up too much sound from the loud speaker it may go into a feedback condition and squeal. Try to position the loud speaker well away from the microphone and in front of the podium.

Make sure your laptop and projector are properly connected, the projector adjusted for the size of the screen (with no keystoning), and sharply focused. Have the laptop positioned so that you can use it as a cue for what is on the projection screen. Try not to look at the projection screen, unless the content requires you to move to make a particular point. Such movement can maintain the audience’s attention. Look primarily at your laptop, your own notes, and your audience.

Room lighting should be subdued to aid in the readability of what is being projected. Don’t make it too dark as your audience may wish to take notes, and you will need enough light to read your own. And there is the possibility that arrangements have been made for the hearing impaired and you need to allow sufficient light in the room for interpretation.

**Ready to Present?**

Public speaking does not come naturally to any of us. But never turn down an opportunity to speak in public when you are asked to do so. Bite the bullet and prepare. Write out your talk and practice it. Stand beside your desk and speak it out loud. Do not just read it to yourself. Better yet, stand in front of a mirror and speak. Also look at your reflection to assure that your appearance is in tune with the occasion. Speak confidently. Remember you would not have been asked to speak if you did not have something to offer.

If you have not been told what your allotted time will be, be sure to ask. Don’t get caught at the last minute with a time slot that is shorter than your talk time. Practice so that you can finish within that limit, and allow sufficient time for questions. Redo your presentation to meet the time constraints, if necessary. Or better yet, let the meeting organizers know how much time you will need. If you overrun, and hurry the last quarter of your presentation, you will be lowering the effectiveness of your presentation.

Finally, ask for questions. And learn to repeat the question. You have a microphone and your questioner may not. Others in the audience may not hear the question. Repeating the question gives the impression that you are a professional.

For many scientific presentations the last slide is acknowledgements of the funding source and the facility at which the research was conducted. In some instances it is
expected that you will provide a bibliography. If so, it is suggested that the following order of the final slides be used:

- A summary slide,
- A slide of acknowledgements
- A slide inviting questions, and
- A bibliography slide.

**Meeting Expectations**

What points do you want your audience to retain as they leave? Be sure your subject matter and your slides do indeed reflect that position and that content. Is there some other group that might benefit from your presentation? Before you shut down your laptop thank your audience for their attention.

Each time you make a presentation, it will get easier. And each time ask yourself what might have made it better. Learn from your own mistakes, listen, and be intent on how others of your peer group made their presentations. What stood out; and can you emulate the methodology both in their speaking and their slide content. Try to be professional about your presentation in every way: written material, slides, spoken word, and demeanor.

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