NAIL YOUR
Next Presentation

5 Deadly Presentation Mistakes and
What to do to Avoid Them

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5 DEADLY SINS PRESENTERS COMMIT AND WHAT TO DO TO AVOID THEM

There are many things that can go wrong with a presentation. From technical failures to your audience being too hungry to pay attention. Some of these things are simply out of your control e.g. an audience member's choice of having super-spicy beef and bean burrito for dinner the night before. Need I say more?

However, for the potential pitfalls that are within your control, you really shouldn't be leaving them up to chance.
This e-book identifies 5 of the most common mistakes (called "sins") presenters make and also shows you how to convert these potential pitfalls into platforms for your presentation success

In coming up with this list of five, I surveyed a wide range of professionals asking what, for them, were the most annoying things they have seen presenters do. I combined this with my experience and expertise in the art and science of creating influence from the stage and came up with the 5 mortal sins of presentations – and how to avoid them. So let's start the countdown

Drumroll please…

1

SIN #5   LACKING CONFIDENCE

"

If you are not sure of yourself, then we definitely *are* sure we don't want to listen to you

This came in at number 5 perhaps because people generally understand how nerve-racking public speaking can be. As a result, they are often forgiving. Forgiving, but not impressed! Not being confident about your subject is a definite way of ensuring that your audience won't buy in to your ideas. Believe it or not, they have to trust you first before they will listen to you. And if you project uncertainty or hesitation, they will instantly switch off. Think about it. Wouldn't you?

It is important to realize that, as a presenter or speaker, you are the leader at the front of the room. It doesn't matter if you are the most junior or the most senior on the corporate pecking order of your company. For those few minutes you take center stage, you must OWN THE SPACE and speak with confidence and authority. The good news is the fact that you are the one giving the presentation means that someone felt you were the right person for the job. Even if you simply volunteered to do this, at least you believed you could (what were you thinking right?). Well, you were right! You do have something to say so get out there and say it with confidence. Let me let you in on a secret… being confident is half the battle.

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✅ WHAT TO DO

Nothing beats adequate preparation and practice to shore up confidence. Using the tips provided in this book, you will be able to prepare for your presentations faster and smarter. However, even when you have done the work of intelligent preparation and rehearsal, your nerves can still act up before you step up to speak. Here is a 3-step process that helps to remedy this (I have used this personally with great success).

POSITIVE 1 SELF-TALK

Spend a few minutes alone before the presentation in front of a mirror (perhaps in the washroom) reaffirming to yourself that you have something of value to share. Create a short affirmation that you can repeat over and over again as you look at yourself in the mirror to shore up your sense of power. It can be as simple as "I know I can do this" If it is convenient, do a few power poses

POSITIVE 2 RECALL

Call to mind a memory of when you did something REALLY WELL. Recreate the experience as vividly as you can and re-experience all the positive emotion. It can be something as simple as when you followed a recipe and made the best pot of plain white rice you ever did make. Or it can be something bigger like the feeling you had when you graduated college and received your diploma. What matters is that the memory contain substantial positive emotional charge. Doing this will cause your nerves to realign into a confident and resourceful state.

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Lastly, think about the bigger picture. The world does not end in that room or with that presentation. This might seem counter-intuitive as you probably would think that you want to be reminding yourself how important this presentation is. However, in my experience, dwelling on the gravity of the presentation can have the opposite effect of what you want

Reminding yourself that the sun will rise tomorrow whether or not you bomb on stage can actually help calm you down and put you in a more serene state of mind. It will also bring just enough levity to the situation to help you relax, do a good job and enjoy yourself while doing it

If you are a religious person, pray for divine help. I find prayer to be very powerful in calming nervousness and bringing balance to the emotions.

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SIN #4   LACKING ENTHUSIASM

"

If you don't care, why should we?

> I have heard many say that it is hard to convince
> someone of something when you are not convinced
> yourself. I think that is incomplete. I believe you can be
> convinced of something and still fail to convince
> someone else. The key is not only in being convinced. It
> is in appearing convinced by being enthusiastic.

I remember having a professor back in university who was truly a dynamic teacher. Students fell over themselves to register for the courses he taught. It wasn't because he taught the most exciting courses. I realize now that it was because of his ability to bring even the most boring topics to life with his own enthusiasm.

Most of us are as stiff as a board when we do a presentation. In real life, we are real, animated people with personality, passions and interests. But when we go to present before a group, we send a representative – a stiff, boring, nervous and lifeless representative. No wonder we struggle to connect and convince the audience. And no wonder the audience doesn't want to buy-in. People don't buy from plywood!

The point? You are not going to win a lot of sales, client contracts or motivate your workforce if you are not energetic and enthusiastic about what it is you are presenting. You must cast aside any fears you feel and take your place front and center – a leader with something of value to say!

✅ WHAT TO DO

First you need to get very clear about the value of your proposition. **Second**, you need to find something exciting to you about that value. **And third**, you need to let that excitement and enthusiasm show as you present. In other words, **put your passion into the presentation.**

If nothing about the idea or product you are offering excites you then, frankly, you will have a hard time selling it with conviction to your audience. Worse still if you know your proposition to be false or deceptive. An important note here: steer clear of trickery. Stick to the truth. Truth gives you power. Deceit gives you nothing but a sad ending. Besides, audiences are uncannily adept at spotting insincerity

> "...audiences are uncannily adept at spotting insincerity"

The good news is your offering doesn't have be saintly or revolutionary – it just has to matter to you – the speaker. It can be as routine as a periodic report. You simply need to find something about that report that matters to you. Something you can be enthusiastic about.

When I worked in the financial industry, I once was called upon to give a presentation to a room full of overworked sales people on a new electronic financial product they were expected to promote and sell. This, on top of all the other myriad products they were already managing.

I knew my own energy and enthusiasm would be key to the success (or failure) of the presentation. I garnered enthusiasm by reminding myself of how this particular product would help the sales people improve their overall value proposition to the clients. In essence, it didn't have to make their jobs harder, it could actually make it easier.

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I also thought about how the resulting success would benefit the client, the sales people and my unit. This gave me a great sense of purpose and belief in the value of my proposition. It also boosted my motivation. Perhaps, more importantly, I let all this show as I presented.

That one presentation was so successful that it led to my being asked to travel around the entire region to give the presentation at different branches of the company.

In my experience, here is what tends to happen when you present with enthusiasm to a deadpan audience. Initially, you will need to have almost enough enthusiasm for yourself as well as your entire audience. As time goes on, your enthusiasm will start to infect the audience. You will then hit what I call platform pay dirt at which point, they start to feed you with energy. This is where you want to be. This is where influence happens with least effort.

The key? Find something you can get excited about, get excited about it and then allow yourself express that excitement and enthusiasm as you present.

SIN #3   BEING DISORGANIZED

"

If you make it too hard to follow you, we won't!

This particular mistake has the potential to completely wreck your presentation. It is also one of the easiest mistakes to make and one of hardest to pinpoint especially when the presenter does many other things right. If a presenter does everything else right but fails in the area of organization, the impact of the message is greatly compromised.

In my experience, this mistake occurs in one of three forms (sometimes all three):

1. Going on too many tangents. This confuses the audience as they are not sure what points matter and what exactly you are trying to communicate. As far as the potency of your message goes, digression results in dilution.

2. Trying to cram too much information into the presentation. This is really common with passionate but less experienced speakers. They try to tell you everything they know about an idea, subject or product in the ten minutes they have to present. Have you ever done this?

3. Excessive cross-pollination of points. This is when a presenter continually skips back and forth between the points of the presentation in a way that distracts the audience.

The problem with these behaviours is that they result in you placing a heavy cognitive load on your audience

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COGNITIVE LOAD

Presenters often are unaware (or ignore) the fact that there is a very real limit to how much the audience can absorb within a given time-frame. There is such a thing as information overload. When this overload happens, just like with computers, the CPU "hangs". In other words, the brain starts to close down. This is not just a cute and convenient analogy, it's a neurologically researched phenomenon

In cognitive psychology, **cognitive load** refers to the amount of mental effort being exerted in holding and processing of new and already stored information. During a presentation, the audience's mind is being exposed to information some of which might be completely unfamiliar to them. It takes substantial energy to decode, process and store this information. Please don't make it harder by being disorganized

Whereas it is acceptable to drop a few clues or plant a few seeds of other points in your presentation as you speak on a particular point, this should be strategic and minimal. The effect should be to bring some cohesion to your **central thesis** (more on central thesis later) while keeping the focus on the present point you are making

What often happens though is that presenters sow so many of these seeds in the wrong patch of their presentations that the seeds produce weeds ultimately sapping your audience's limited mental resources. I call this phenomenon "when ideas speak out of turn". And just like in real life, when too many people in a group speak out of turn, all you hear is noise.

✅ WHAT TO DO

BEGIN WITH THE **1** END IN MIND

Beginning with the end in mind means that you determine two key things - the **purpose** of your talk and the **people** to whom you are speaking. By doing this, you can be strategic in your approach

The purpose of a good talk could be to educate, persuade, inspire, motivate, etc. However, when you watch many speakers, it is as though they have chosen their purpose as being to inundate, nauseate or tranquilize. Not you. Not anymore.

It is important to identify what your purpose is as it will serve as a good filter for what points and sub-points you present as well as the order in which you present them. You must also consider who your audience is – their pains, interests and goals

For example, a CEO (Chief Executive Officer) with the purpose of motivating company staff and a CFO (Chief Financial Officer) with the core purpose of educating investors can give information in a talk about the company's financial position. However the amount, order and emphasis of information will vary significantly between the two scenarios. The CFO might want to focus on specific KPIs (key performance indicators) for the investors whereas the CEO might want to talk more about general trends of growth and revenues as a lead in to influencing some behavioural change in the workforce.

Sometimes, you will discover that your talk has a dual or even tripartite purpose. This is perfectly fine

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In this book for instance, I am educating on the common presentation pitfalls and methods to overcome them, motivating you to practice these methods and inspiring you to believe in your abilities to be an excellent speaker/presenter

"...all presentations are, at their core, of one kind – they are all persuasive"

To help simplify this I invite you to look at all presentations as being fundamentally of one kind. Whether the presentation is about financial statements , health and safety regulations or attitudes towards organizational changes, all presentations are, at their core, of one kind – they are all persuasive. In one form or another, your overall aim is to get people to adopt or at least entertain a certain idea or point of view. Depending on who your audience is and what you are trying to persuade them to do, you can choose what purposes are primary and which ones are secondary and thereby pick your points in a way that best achieves those purposes

CLARIFY YOUR 2 CENTRAL THESIS

Your central thesis is the overall thrust of your presentation. First you must clarify this and *then* pick your supporting points

Regardless of how intricately involved the details of your ideas are, this central thesis is something that should be expressible in one short, concise statement. This is the core idea you are building on and driving at throughout your presentation. It brings order and coherence to your talk and guides the architecture of it.

"But you don't understand, Anthony, my concepts are too cool and complicated to be simplified into just one short statement"

Ok, let's look at an example

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> **"Even one of the most complicated and influential scientific theories of all time has a simple central thesis"**

Albert Einstein's theory of general relativity is one of the most important ever formulated in physics. It is a mathematically complex theory on which hundreds of books have been written and thousands of lectures have been delivered since its publication in 1915.

However, even this grand scientific theory, with its dozens of pages of mathematical proofs, that has transformed our view of the universe has, at its core, a clear and concise central thesis – space and time are not separate but are intertwined as a fabric – the famous Fabric of Space-time

See what I mean? Even one of the most complicated and influential scientific theories of all time has a simple central thesis

If you were giving a motivational talk to your staff, for example, with the purpose of boosting their morale through a difficult period within the organization, your central thesis might be simply – Tough times make us stronger and better. Everything else you say, every joke, anecdote, story, statistic etc. that you include should, in some direct or indirect way contribute to this core idea.

You might add sub-points like tough times force reflection, build character, expose weakness, provide clarity etc. but the main thrust remains that you want them to leave your presentation with a sense of power and a positive outlook – These tough times will make me better. You might suggest some action to take, some practice to adopt, you might even announce some changes in the way things will be done but again, for your message to be effective, that is for the audience to follow and understand, it should tie back to your core thesis – These tough times will us better

Perhaps, on the other hand, your company has been doing quite well. Profits are on the up and you want to encourage the workforce to keep up the good work. Well your central thesis might be – When you rest, you rust

The key? By clearly defining the main point of your speech, you are able to pick your pieces in line with this and present your ideas in a clear and logical progression which your audience can easily understand and likely remember

Arrange your points and sub points in a manner that is clear and easy to follow supporting them with material that is suitable

Your audience will most likely be a mix of different personalities with different learning styles. That said, a clear, linear and logical progression delivered in a smooth, conversational tone will work for most people

Generally speaking, you want a **distinct beginning** that catches the audience's attention; a **well-developed body** of points peppered with supporting material and humour; and a **powerful conclusion** that summarises your speech and (if appropriate) provides some direction as to some action to take
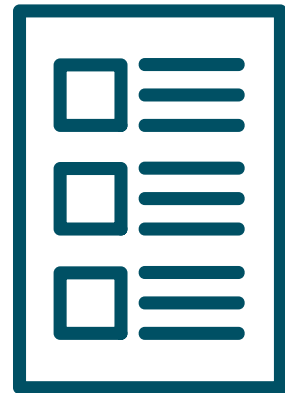
Overall, organization is central to the success of your presentation. Spend time gaining clarity on the purpose of your presentation as well as some insight into your audience. With this in mind, decide on a central thesis and sub-points for your presentation. Mine out some supporting material and then present these in a smooth logical flow with an introduction, a body and a conclusion

This will go a long way in ensuring your message is received, understood and remembered

To help, I have developed an easy speech organization too to help. Grab a free copy here

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SIN #2   SLIDEABUSE

SlideAbuse is an expression I coined to describe incorrect or disruptive use of slides in a presentation and is easily one of the most common presentation offenses

I will briefly describe some of the common slide malpractices and how they hamper your success as a presenter as well as some tips on how to overcome them. At the end of the chapter, I provide a simple info-graphic to summarize and provide examples. Let us begin

1. Using excessive text on your slides

"We can read thank you very much. We didn't need to come here just to sit and read your slides. Send them to us and we'll read them on our own time"

Having too much text on your slides invites the audience to ignore you and read the slides. And depending on how dense with text the slides are, it can actually exhaust the audience mentally. Reading is a very demanding cognitive exercise. Did you know that the brain actually treats each individual letter as a separate image when processing words and sentences? It is no wonder the saying goes a picture is worth a thousand words.

✅ WHAT TO DO

In short, keep it short. A few big, bold lines per slide is sufficient. Better still, just use a simple image that captures the idea succinctly. More on images as we contemplate the next "sin"

2. Using complex images on your slides

In the previous point, I mentioned the saying a picture is worth a thousand words. Does not mean that ten pictures juxtaposed or superimposed are worth ten thousand words? Short answer - no.

Using a complex visual image such as a complicated flowchart shown in one blow can be overwhelming even to a technical audience. Also, using a picture that is too "busy" can distract. Again, it takes the attention away from you and your information or message and puts a large cognitive load on your audience's brains.

✅ WHAT TO DO

Use clear and simple pictures that illustrate your points succintly. This can also be a good way of injecting humor. By using a funny picture that is appropriate and captures your point, you achieve more. Your audience laughs making them (and you) more comfortable and more likely to entertain and remember the point you are making

If you must illustrate a process, design the slides in a way that presents only one component or idea at a time giving your audience time to absorb the information and to stop the steam jetting out of their ears. Better still, offer to provide the flowchart as a supplement document after the presentation so people know they will have time to examine it later. This will allow them focus on your presentation. When required, use clean and simple charts properly labeled with a good, pleasant and clear contrast of colours (more on colours later)

I have created a resource guide of online tools and sites I personally use to design clean and effective visuals for my presentations and SlideShare documents often in less than 30 minutes. All of these are easy, intuitive and free of charge. You will find tonnes of free pictures, charts and even ready-made templates to enhance your slides

You don't require any technical know-how. If you can use PowerPoint and email, you can definitely use these. Download the free resource guide in pdf format here

3. Using slides as notes

This one seems to really get on people's nerves. Perhaps you have witnessed someone do this. Or perhaps you have done it at one point or the other. You stood there with your back or side to the audience and clicked through your "presentation" simply reading text off your slides and occasionally glancing in the audience's direction

" If I wanted someone to read to me, I'd ask my mom for a bedtime story

I once spoke to a delegate at a conference who was so upset by a particular presenter doing this that she provided a harsh and negative criticism in writing to the meeting planners. Now your colleagues at work or your staff might not write you a sour letter after a reading of your presentation but you can be sure they, like this delegate, would be less than impressed. And they almost certainly would not be moved to action

Using your slides as notes removes you from the audience and suggests a lack of preparation or worse a lack of competence. Neither of which you want as a presenter. You want to appear confident and composed and, importantly, connected to your audience.

✅ WHAT TO DO

I am a big advocate of rehearsing your material until you are comfortable enough to deliver without notes. However I understand this is not always doable. Therefore, if you must use notes, for the sake of your presentation, do not put them up on your slides for all to see. Instead, have a few short and sweet key phrases that remind you of your points and sub points (discussed earlier) written or printed in large capital lettering on index cards. Have these arranged in sequence ahead of time. Hold these in your hand or place them on a lectern and glance at them briefly as you go through the presentation. Place each card at the bottom of the deck (or to one side on the lectern) as you go through your points.

Some people use the presenter mode in their slide software where their notes are displayed on their own monitor but not on the main screen. This is fine if your monitor is positioned in a way that it does not cause a distraction to you or your audience when you reference it.

This has the added advantage of freeing up your hands for gesticulations while you speak. Be careful that you practice with the technology though until you master the flow. As it has been said, technology is a good servant but a mean master.

Take the time to prepare adequately so that you are able to present even without slides. Most people that fall into this sin do so because they lack confidence and so lean on the slides for support. Some of the people I have worked with also admit to committing this sin as a way of avoiding eye contact with the audience out of their fear of public speaking.

Adequate preparation will help allay some of this fear along with some positive self-talk (discussed earlier). Then you can stop using PowerPoint as a crutch and instead use it as it is meant to be used – an enhancer.

4. Using slides that are hard to see

"

It would be nice to be able to see your visuals

Here is where we talk about your choice of templates, colour combinations, fonts and font size. We will also touch on lighting in the presentation room. In brief, this aspect of SlideAbuse involves one or all of the following

- Using colour combinations that do not provide adequate contrast (e.g. white text on a grey background)

- Using colour combinations that are overwhelming (e.g. purple text on a red background)

- Using low quality, stretched-out, pixelated or washed-out images or pictures

- Using images that are too "busy"

- Using overly decorative font types

- Using too many different fonts or being inconsistent with your fonts

- Using a font size that is too small - hard to read

- Using a font size that is too large - can be interpreted as YELLING

✅ WHAT TO DO

There is a lot that can be said here that go beyond the scope of this book. Indeed there are entire businesses built around the design of slides for professional presentations that can cost anything from hundreds to thousands of dollars for a full presentation. However if I were to distill my study and experience in this area into one short and simple sentence it would be this

Design your slides for the presentation space, not your office space

Quite often, presentations that look stunning on your PC or Mac at home or in the office look washed-out on a projector screen and can frustrate your audience

By keeping the space in which you will be presenting in mind – the size, the lighting, the type and size of the screen (60" flat screen LCD/LED, 80" smart screen, projector screens or a white wall surface) in mind, you can choose the right fonts, images and templates to ensure your visuals are clearly seen. In choosing, here are a few things to do;

☐ Visualize your presentation on the actual screen. In general, LED and LCD screens produce the closest replication of your computer screen. For projector screens, the output can vary considerably. In this case, choose sharper images and clearer contrasts between background and text

☐ Imagine being at the front row and also at the back of the room. Would you be able to see the presentation?

☐ Consider lighting. If using a projector screen, and the room allows it, plan to turn the lights above the screen off. This will improve the clarity of your slides

A rule of thumb is to always err on the side of caution when designing your slides. Use high quality pictures with a simple subject and some dead space. For text, use sharp contrasts with neutral colours. If you must use bright colours, proceed with caution. You have been warned

SIN #1 BEING BORING

Whether you are in sales, I.T, HR or accounting; whether you are CEO, CFO or plain old Joe, you simply cannot afford to be boring when you present. In this day and age of social media, YouTube etc. and ever-increasing distraction, there is simply no place for a blasé speaker

Indeed, being a boring presenter can actually do damage to you career-wise. On the other hand, the ability to deliver powerful, engaging and effective presentations can greatly advance your career

Almost all the respondents had this one in their top three in some form or other. Surprisingly, this particular sin was mentioned even more than the not being credible. It seems people are quicker to tolerate a lack of credentials than a lack of personality. Not being credible didn't even make this top 5 list! Perhaps people naturally expect that you should know what you are talking about before getting up to talk about it. They have obviously never attended a political rally

✅ WHAT TO DO

I call this formula the V3 Formula (Vocal and Visual Vim)

VISUAL **1** VIM

If you can, and if the presentation lends itself to it, use vivid visuals (discussed earlier under sin #4) to add some variety to your presentation. You can use any of the popular slide creation programs like PowerPoint or Keynote. Ensure you have the technology down pat though so this does not introduce a new problem

Alternatively, you can use a flip-chart with coloured illustrations. These will help stimulate your audience visually and keep them engaged. Your choice of whether or not to create the visuals before or during the presentation will depend on the nature of your presentation, how much time you have and how involved the design of the visuals are

Another way to create visual stimulation is to move around the room. Beware the caged tiger syndrome though. You don't want to pace back and forth incessantly as this can be distracting (and annoying) to your audience.
Movement is especially effective when transitioning from one idea, point or story to another. Avoid fidgeting as much as possible. When you move, it should be with purpose and should add, not take away, from your presentation.

✅ WHAT TO DO

I call this formula the V3 Formula (Vocal and Visual Vim)

VOCAL 1 VIM

Use pacing (of speech, not feet) and volume to add some variety to how you sound. Speed up when you are talking about something around which you want to create some excitement. Slow down when you want your audience to ponder the weight of your words. Vary your volume to emphasize certain points and create drama (Hint: to this point, lowering your voice, when done properly, can be just as effective as raising it)

Incorporate these into your practice time - do it out-loud. This way you can hear how it sounds, you can experiment with different volumes and pitches but, most importantly, you get used to doing it so it flows naturally on presentation day.

The key is to not talk in a monotone or stay glued to one spot in the room. Unless, of course, your aim is group hypnosis

There you have it! The 5 mortal presentation sins and their remedies. Use these guidelines and you will greatly improve the quality of your presentations resulting in a positive impact on your career

Do you know anyone who commits any of these sins? Share this book with them

For more useful tips and resources on creating influence and communicating with confidence, or to see how I can help you or organization, visit www.anthonysanni.com and sign up for my periodic blogs and articles on Influence and Leadership