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# THE FLOOR IS YOURS

Because Life Is Too Short  
for Bad Presentations



ACADEMIA  
PRESS

**THE FLOOR  
IS YOURS  
BECAUSE LIFE  
IS TOO SHORT  
FOR BAD  
PRESENTATIONS**

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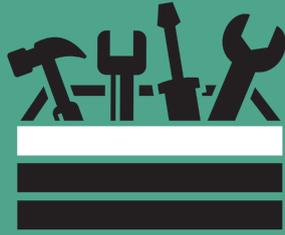
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# STORY

Why can't I say whatever I want?

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As a preview you get  
the chapter

'How should you start  
your presentation?'

So at least you'll know  
how to start...

<b>Start</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Get their attention</li> <li>2. Problem-solution-benefit</li> <li>3. Key message</li> <li>4. Introduce yourself (title slide)</li> </ol>
<b>Middle</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. First element</li> <li>2. Second element</li> <li>3. Third element</li> </ol>
<b>End</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Summary-conclusions</li> <li>2. Key message</li> </ol>

*Start, middle and end. There are still a few things missing, but your structure is nearly finalized.*

Let's have a look at how you can best start your presentation.

## How should you start your presentation?

So there you are, standing at the front of the room, ready to go. People start filing in, shuffling past each other to get to their seats, whispered conversations start up. Some check their e-mails and text messages; others just stare out of the window. A few are yawning already.

You clear your throat and prepare to say the first sentence of your presentation...

You may think it odd that it is only at this stage – after we have already discussed the structure down to the finest detail – that we are now going to look at the best way to start your presentation. But it's logical, really. It is only now that you know what you are going to talk about.

The start of your presentation is vitally important. It determines whether or not your public says 'This is something I want to know more about' or (as is more often the case) 'How the hell can I sneak out of this room without

anyone seeing me'. If you get the start right, you have already won half the battle.

## How not to start

Most presentations start with a title slide that shows your name, the title of the presentation and the logo of your organization, followed by an outline. Hardly inspiring. Worse still, some presenters start directly with their research approach. This doesn't work either. Why? Because you immediately set off at a hundred miles an hour and go straight into the main part of your discourse. No, you first need to whet your public's appetite, give them a taste of what you have to say. It's a bit like sniffing a glass of wine before you drink it. It stimulates the senses and makes you curious for what is to follow. And your title slide? That is not exactly the most exciting piece of your presentation, is it? So don't start with it.

Bearing this in mind, other bad ways to start your presentation include:

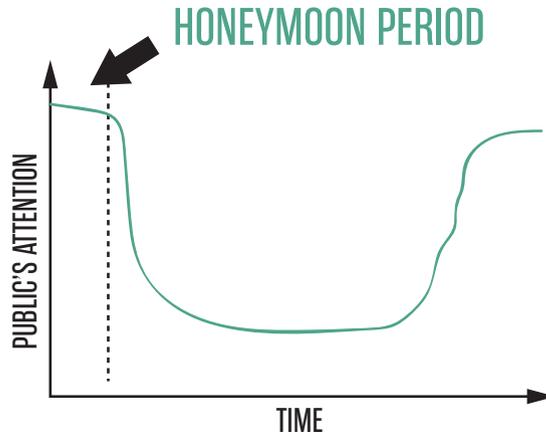
- 'My research is about...'
- 'My name is... and I'm a researcher in the ... department.'
- 'Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Before I start, I would like to thank the following people...'

You should only give this kind of information after you have put forward your problem-solution-benefit and your key message. Not before.

Don't be afraid to launch your key message early on in your presentation. Some presenters don't feel comfortable with this, thinking they have given away their most important conclusion right at the very start. Don't listen to them; do it anyway! Your public's attention will never be greater than during those crucial first few minutes. This is the 'honeymoon' period, the period when mutual passion and interest are still high. After that, their attention will slowly start to wane. The butterflies in the stomach will be replaced by the yawns of routine boredom.

Attention levels usually shoot back up again toward the end of the presentation or when the mid-session break is approaching. The audience senses that 'salvation' is at hand! That's why it is important to always end your presentation by repeating the key message you gave at the start. You can also

generate a bit more attention in the middle of your presentation by using ‘energizers’, like a video or an exercise. If you are talking to a group of students, you can even try, ‘This is important for the exams!’



*The start of your presentation is important: that's when your public's attention is greatest.*

Resist the temptation to start with an apology to the public:

- ‘Sorry, but I really haven’t had a lot of time to prepare this.’
- ‘Normally, I wouldn’t be giving this presentation, but I had to replace my boss at the last minute.’

You either give the presentation and do it to the best of your ability, or you don’t do it at all. Apologizing because you have given a bad presentation is the same as saying, ‘Sorry for needlessly wasting your time, ladies and gentlemen.’

## So how should you start?

How can you make sure that everyone in the audience is looking at you and giving you maximum attention? By saying or doing something unexpected. You have to grab your public by the scruff of the neck and draw them irresistibly towards you. There are a couple of good ways you can do this. For example, with a story or a question. These can serve as a bridge to the ‘problem-solution-benefit’ part of your introduction.

### START WITH A STORY

A story is a safe way of starting. It is something you can learn by heart. Equally important, it is something that sounds genuine, not contrived. A story draws people into your presentation and is ideal for those early moments when you are at your most nervous. If you can start by telling a good story and telling it well, you have already jumped the first hurdle.

An additional advantage is that a story builds up gradually. This gives your public time to focus. When you first start talking, most of them will still be fiddling with their smartphones and laptops. As your story progresses, these devices will gradually be put away and the background whispering will die down. By the end of your story, you should have them hanging on your every word.

You can tell a story about yourself, or about a real or fictitious person connected with your subject:

‘This is Luke. (You show a photograph of a young boy.) Luke is six years old and in his first year at primary school. His teacher has noticed that Luke is finding it hard to keep up in class. While the other children can already count, Luke is still having problems. But Luke also has another difficulty: he can’t hear very well. That’s why he wears a hearing aid. He can usually understand normal conversations but not with all the background noise in the classroom. Luke can’t always hear the teacher, and then his attention starts to wander. There are many children with hearing difficulties like Luke. My research investigates the effect that extraneous noise in the classroom can have on the development of these children.’

You can also use your first few slides to stage a story in a way that makes your theme more tangible, like in the following example:

### Fire! Fire!

The house is ablaze. The flames are leaping from the screen. I can almost feel the heat searing my cheeks. The second slide shows the fire brigade in action, as they attempt to get the blaze under control. The third slide shows the aftermath: the

blackened house, piles of smoking furniture, pools of dirty water everywhere... 'So what do we do with all this contaminated water?' asks the presenter as his opening sentence. 'We can't just dump it in the drains as it is. So I repeat: what do we do with it?' He is a researcher investigating methods to de-contaminate the water used to put out fires. Say it like that and it sounds quite boring, but by now I was on the edge of my seat. It was a strong start. If he had opened with a banal title slide about 'the reprocessing of extinguishing water', I would have been out of there in two minutes. But now I want to stay. I am curious to find out exactly what they do with all that water...

And it's game, set and match if you can actually play out a story on stage, like Bart Knols once did:

### Starting in your boxer shorts!

Bart Knols is a Dutch malaria scientist. His research won him an Ig Nobel Prize, awarded each year to research that can make you laugh as well as think. He was given the award for his research that showed how you can attract malarial mosquitoes with Limburg cheese because it smells very similar to human feet! In his TED presentation he used a highly original opening to immediately get his public's undivided attention.

It is dark. You can hear the buzzing of a mosquito. Then suddenly: Bam! The light goes on. Bart Knols is sitting in his boxer shorts on a bed, with a little blood on his hand and his forehead, where he has swatted the troublesome insect. He starts talking. 'Mosquitoes. I hate them. You too? There's only one good thing I can say about them: they prefer biting my wife to me.' There is a pause. 'But that's not so strange. Why do they bite her more than me? Because of her smell. Mosquitoes can smell us in the dark.'

By now, Bart Knols has moved to the middle of the stage and starts his story about the research he did for his doctoral thesis. The audience is listening with bated breath.

Don't get us wrong: we are not suggesting you should start all your presentations in your underwear! But we are suggesting that you need to think carefully

and creatively about the way you tell your opening story. It is also worth noting the way Bart Knols repeatedly addresses his public directly: 'I hate mosquitoes. You too?' You can almost hear everyone in the audience thinking, 'Yes, irritating bastards!' And then again, 'Why do they bite her more than me?' To which his listeners again silently reply, 'Good question, Bart. I know people like that. So why do they get bitten more?'

The audience is hooked. He has connected with his public and made his key message crystal clear right from the very start: mosquitoes find us in the dark by smell. It is the perfect opening and he is now ready to move on with the rest of his presentation.

If you want to view the full presentation, search for 'Bart Knols: kill mosquitos and end malaria'.

### START WITH A QUESTION

A second good way to open your presentation is with a question. You need to remember that at this early stage it is unlikely anyone will actually give you a spontaneous answer. You have only just started your presentation. People don't know who you are or what you are going to say. Most of us are reluctant to talk if we don't fully understand the situation. For this reason, it is best to ask a question they can answer in their head: 'Have you ever bought an electrical device, read the instruction manual and still not had the faintest idea how to use it?'

Other good opening questions include:

- 'Wouldn't it be great if...?'
- 'Don't you think that...?'
- 'Which of you ...?' (here you can ask them to put up their hands)

Another good opener – which is not a question but still gets your audience thinking – is 'Imagine that...'

In the section on SHOW, we will look in more depth at questions you can ask your public.

## The story of the toaster

Do you lie awake at night worrying about dementia? Probably not. Unless your parents or grandparents have it. Or maybe your friends. So what can you do as a researcher to get the public interested in this subject? How can you make the theme tangible for them? Sharon Savage knows how. She took part in the 'Three Minute Thesis' competition at the University of New South Wales in Australia. And she won. Hands down.

Her entire presentation is powerful, but the opening is a stroke of genius: 'Don't you just hate when you can't think of a word. That thingy or whatsit. For dementia sufferers, this can be a constant battle. Particularly with semantic dementia, everyday words like a toaster can be forgotten. And as words are stripped away, your ability to do everyday activities like the grocery shopping suddenly becomes a challenge. Imagine you went to the supermarket and you looked down at your shopping list and you realized that you didn't actually know what any of these words meant. Scary!'

What exactly is Sharon Savage doing here? She links her theme to something small and everyday that we can all understand. She also gives very concrete examples of situations in which we can all imagine ourselves, which allows us to empathize better with people suffering from dementia. What's more, in her opening sentence she immediately enters into dialogue with her public. Three techniques you can adjust to suit any presentation.

You can watch the full presentation on YouTube, using the search term 'Three Minute Thesis Winner – Sharon Savage'.

### MAKE A JOKE OR USE A CARTOON?

Some researchers like to open their presentation with a joke or a cartoon. Both options are risky. With a joke (or cartoon), there is a good chance that half the people in the room won't understand it, and so you will have lost 50% of your audience before you've even started. A cartoon forces people to read the text and this takes time, which means that when you show your first slide you can't actually say anything. In other words, you start with a stony silence, which at some point you have to interrupt, again forcing your public to make a choice: listen to you or carry on reading. Most of them choose the

reading and therefore miss your first few spoken sentences. It's not a good way to start.

### SHOW A VIDEO?

Yes, you can start with a video, but it has to be very relevant and you still have to find a good way to make the transition from this visual element to the start of your spoken text. Remember also that adding a video to your presentation is like inviting Murphy into the room. Do you have a plan B if the video suddenly jams? You can probably talk your way out of it if this happens in the middle of your discourse, but if it happens right at the beginning you will probably lose the goodwill of the audience for the rest of the presentation. First impressions are important and their first impression will be 'What a bungler!' If you want to show a video, make sure it is properly integrated into your PowerPoint (via the menu options 'insert' and 'video'). Embedding the video in this way means it is much less likely to go wrong.

## When can you say something about yourself?

We have already said you shouldn't start with your name and organization. Not even when you try to lighten things up by talking about your kids and your hobbies. Some people might find this fun and think that you're a nice person, but others will fail to see the relevance. Only do it if you can link your personal information to your theme. Imagine that you once climbed Mount Everest and that your research is about how the body reacts to oxygen deficiency at high altitude. In this case, you are perfectly entitled to start with a photo of you on top of the world's highest mountain. But linking a cute selfie of you and your cat to a presentation about renewable energy? Not really.

Time for a recap. Make sure you start with:

- something to grab their attention but clearly linked to your project or research;
- followed by your elevator pitch with its 'problem-solution-benefit' combo;
- followed by your key message.

If you have done everything right, your audience should now be thinking 'What a relevant problem. I'd like to know how they plan to solve it.' They will be looking at you closely, wanting to know more about you and wondering whether or not you can really come up with the goods.

This is the moment when you can tell them with pride exactly who you are, who you work for, and how you first got the idea that forms the basis for your presentation. Don't give them your entire CV; just the bits that are relevant to your theme. Are you using slides? Show them the title slide with your name and organization.

## How should you end your presentation?

If your opening creates a first impression, the end of your presentation creates the last one. The closing minutes of your discourse will decide the mood of your public as they leave and the message they take home with them. Never finish abruptly without some concluding remarks. This would be like running a marathon, but then stopping 100 metres from the finishing line!

What are the ingredients for a good end to your presentation?

1. A short summary and your conclusions. You can refer back to your outline: what did you discuss and which three points (three is still the magic number) do you want people to remember most? What are the most important lessons?
2. If appropriate, a call to action. Do you want your public to do something for you or think about something? If so, now is the time to ask.
3. Your key message. You mentioned it at the start, but now you need to mention it again, so that it is the last thing in people's minds as they leave.

If you are using slides, set your name and contact details on the last slide. Is there a website where your public can find out more information? Put that on the slide as well.

Which closing sentence do you prefer?

- 'I invite you all to join with me in the battle against cancer. Thank you for your attention' (followed by a broad smile).
- 'Er...well... that's all. Thanks for listening' (followed by a face like a child that knows it has done something wrong and is about to be punished).

Your closing words need to be powerful and must stick in the audience's memory. Think carefully about these words and link them to your key message. Learn the last few sentences by heart; it looks more genuine than



# SHOW

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- Do you regularly give presentations?
- Are you unsure about timing?
- Worried you will send your public to sleep?
- Do you want to give a presentation that sticks, one that brings results?

Authors **Toon Verlinden** and **Hans Van de Water** set up the company **The Floor is Yours** in 2012. Because 'life is too short for bad presentations', right? They have since trained thousands of researchers in the techniques necessary to prepare and give effective presentations.

Drawing on their own wide-ranging experience, they offer useful tips and tricks that will help you score with the audience, and provide solutions for every possible presentation problem. Too introvert? Complex themes? Paralyzed by stress? This book shows that giving a presentation doesn't need to be an ordeal. You will learn how to keep your audience's attention to achieve the results you want and will also be shown a number of classic and instantly recognizable examples of bad presentations, so that you can immediately see how not to do it!

In addition to being an international presentation coach and an expert in scientific communication, **Toon Verlinden** is a freelance scientific and travel journalist. He is also organizer of the Sound of Science festival.

**Hans Van de Water** is an international presentation coach and expert in scientific communication. He is also the founder of the Battle of the Scientists, a project that gives researchers the opportunity to present their work to primary school children.

*How can you convince the world of your message? The Floor is Yours instructs you in the necessary dos and don'ts to tell your story. A must-read.*

— Koenraad Debackere, Professor of Economics and Business Administration, KU Leuven

*Easy to read and packed with humour. Compulsory reading for everyone who wants to present complex messages in a clear and convincing manner.*

— Jan-Willem Toering, director of the Royal Netherlands Chemical Society (KNCV)



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