

Must It Be This Way? Ten Rules for Keeping Your Audience Awake During Conferences

by Sam Wineburg

It's AERA's Annual Meeting, San Francisco, 1985, and I have a chance to hear up close and personal the researchers whose work I worshipped in yellow and pink highlights. I can still remember the anticipation that gripped me as I awaited this event.

It was a crisp Monday morning and I walked—no, galloped—to the appointed room. I chose a session in which four luminaries were speaking on the latest developments in research on teaching. The hallway was abuzz, the room was packed, and bodies were hanging out of the doorway. But somehow—with youthful exuberance, no doubt—I squeezed my way into the room and nudged to the front. Wow!

The first speaker strode toward the podium. A famous person! (Was it tacky to ask for autographs?) She took out a thick sheaf of notes and, head bowed, began. For 10 minutes she scarcely looked up. When the discussant slipped the 2-minute warning under her eyes, she accelerated to 300 WPM, racing against the clock to get through the remaining five pages. “Your time is up,” interrupted the chair. “I know, I know,” said the famous researcher on teaching. “Just one more point.” The talk ran over by 5 minutes.

The second speaker was slightly better. He did not read his talk, but instead showed slides. “Show” is euphemistic: He fired slides like an Uzi fires rounds. No sooner had my eyes adjusted to the correlation matrix on Slide 6 than Slide 7 was pro-

jected, and so on, till Slide 103. Maybe I was the dimwitted one, unable to absorb the information presented to me by the world's leading lights, but this hypothesis was rejected as I scanned my fellow audience members. To a person, they had their programs out, quietly shuffling through the pages, dog-earing ones that looked interesting, and busily planning the rest of their day.

This was AERA? My heart sank.

So it was in 1985. Aside from the advent of PowerPoint, little has changed. Famous (infamous?) researchers still read their papers, panelists still fail to engage their audiences, and many people continue to shake their heads about how a group of educators serve as such poor examples of teaching. Must it be this way? Are we doomed to use 75% of our time in sessions rifling through the program?

The answer is NO! In what follows, I offer “Ten Rules for Keeping Your Audience Awake.” While you might not attain the rhetorical eminence of Mario Cuomo, the following 10 rules will point you in the right direction.

Rule #1

Your talk is not your paper. Misconception *numero uno*: that a 15-minute talk can somehow be a spoken version of a 25-page paper. Sure, you can speak like a chipmunk and probably get through a chunk of your paper, but, in the process, your audience will begin to loathe you and wish they'd come armed with tomatoes. Here's a better approach: Think of your talk as an *advertisement* for your paper. Your goal is to cultivate interest, to spark curiosity. Rather than spilling the whole story of your theoretical framework in all its splendiferous glory, give us one or two anchoring points. Method? Leave the bundle of qualifications at home. Get to the heart of the mat-

ter, your most interesting, juicy, and counterintuitive points. Give us enough to pique our interest, but not sate it.

Rule #2

Your data mean more to you than to your audience. This means just what it says. You have been immersed in your data for months; you know their shape and feel—the exact words of your respondents, the nuances in them, and the chart you slaved over. Such labors of love are difficult to translate into a 15-minute talk. Choose your data selectively. And if you choose to read quotes, use ellipses (those three little dots) liberally. In a spoken talk, it's okay to clean up your respondent's words. Eliminate the instances of “you know” and “well, as I was saying” to make it easier on your audience. There are liberties you can take with an oral talk that you can't in print.

Rule #3

Middle-aged people lose their eyesight. Print-dense slides in 12-point type make the over-40 set want to swat you with their programs. Be considerate: no slides with print less than 32-point type—**boldfaced!**

Rule #4

Never project a quotation without reading it to your audience. Basic pedagogy here—it takes time to process written information. When you put up a slide with a quotation, let people look at it and then read it aloud. It takes more time—but it is also more considerate.

Rule #5

Look at your audience. Yup. I wish I didn't have to say it, but good old Toastmaster technique works at AERA too. And don't only look forward center, as if you are a talking mannequin at Disneyland. Scan your entire audience. Look *at* them: right,

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left, into their eyes. Feel their energy and adjust yourself accordingly. “But how can I do this if I have my talk in front of me and I don’t have it memorized?” (See Rule #6.)

Rule #6

If you have to read your text, learn how to do it—and practice! Spoken language is different from written language. In print, we can write long sentences with loop-de-loop qualifications and Geertzian authorial intrusions. But if we try to speak this prose to a public audience, we might as well slip Soma into their cups. When speaking, we use simpler words and shorter sentences. It’s okay to start practicing with your written text, but then edit it. Dilute the thick language and go easy on the big words (i.e., save “legitimate peripheral participation” for your paper; better yet, don’t save it at all!). Print out your 15-minute talk, double-spaced, 14-point bold type. Then do what your 7th grade English teacher tried to teach you: Practice. After the second time through, you will see that certain words make you mealy mouthed. Replace them with easier ones. When you get the text you’re comfortable with, practice again, this time in front of a mirror. Keep one finger on the text (so you don’t lose your place) and look up to face your (imagined) audience. If all of this is new, spend a couple of hours getting used to it.

Rule #7

Do not use PowerPoint until you have read *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint* (Tufte, 2003) and *PowerPoint Antidote* (Norvig, 2000).

Rule #8

An academic talk is a diamond—the beginning and the end are the cutting edges of your talk. When I was a high school journalist, I learned the “inverted pyramid” form. News editors cut a story from the bottom; news writers learn to put the important stuff in the lead and then to systematically array information in decreasing importance. An academic talk, however, is a diamond, not a pyramid. The most important stuff comes at the beginning and at the end. If you find yourself running behind and need to cut, have a contingency plan somewhere in the middle. But stick with the aesthetic integrity of your diamond—beginnings and ends matter most.

Rule #9

You may not say, “Just one more thing.” (Refer to Rule #1.)

Rule #10

Think coda. It comes from the Latin word *cauda*, which means tail, but refers to some-

thing that serves to conclude or summarize while maintaining an interest of its own. Remember, Rule #1: Your talk is an advertisement for your paper. You want your last words to be memorable, to inspire new questions, to leave your audience with a juicy riddle. Don’t say, “More research is needed” even if more research *is* needed. Find some way—elegantly, gracefully, and memorably—to bring your talk to a stinging conclusion, an ending that bundles it up, but still leaves an opening at the end of the session.

If you follow these rules, make sure you bring a big stack of papers to the session. They’ll be gone before you know it.

REFERENCES

- Norvig, P. (2000). PowerPoint antidote. Retrieved February 3, 2004, from <http://www.norvig.com/Gettysburg>
- Tufte, E. R. (2003). The cognitive style of PowerPoint. Retrieved February 3, 2004, from http://www.edwardtufte.com/tufte/books_pp

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Please note: There have been unanticipated delays for the next volume of Review of Research in Education. We hope to have Volume 27 (2003) off press and shipped by late summer.