Giving an Excellent Presentation: 10 Lessons From Master Educators

To make a meaningful impression on your audience, keep them engaged, know your slides, create stimulating breaks, and answer questions.

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Whether we have chosen an academic pathway or not, most of us will serve as educators in some capacity during our careers, with our pupils ranging from fresh medical students to peers and even seasoned colleagues. Let’s be honest, when you find yourself sitting in a lecture hall listening to a presentation on any topic, whether that’s stent choice or a tough TAVR case, it’s easy to tell straightaway whether you’re going to be captivated. It’s one thing to be able to read notes off a slide set, yet it’s another to engage your audience and compel them to take away something vital. I’ve had the opportunity to attend some fantastic talks from master educators, and I have compiled a list of qualities that the best of them all seem to possess. Here are 10 tips I’d like to pass on.

1. **Know your audience.** When preparing a presentation, remember that not everyone may be familiar with your field. Make sure a nonspecialist can follow your talk if you expect them to be attending. From teaching medical students to conducting grand rounds, your format needs to be customized based on who is watching you.

2. **Have a broad outline.** Having an overall framework will not only make it easier to plan and formulate your presentation, but it will keep you on task and on time. Seasoned presenters have told me how they initially draft the body of their presentation on paper and then later build it on the computer. Also, displaying an outline to the audience helps them follow along and highlights your key objectives and learning points.

3. **Practice the mantra of “less is more.”** When you think you’re done with your slide set, try cutting out a few. By reducing your number of slides and making the information on said slides easier to read, you become a more concise presenter. Some general rules of thumb: don’t have more than three to four lines per slide and don’t write complete sentences.

4. **Using simple but compelling graphics.** Displaying a table or figure? Instead of copying the whole table with 20 variables from a paper, make a new one with the relevant data that you will talk about. Also, while you can use captivating graphics and visuals to emphasize key points, remember that too many pictures can be distracting. A picture is worth a thousand words unless it is a picture of a thousand words.

5. **Review and re-review your slides.** Don’t be afraid to edit with a heavy hand. If you don’t think you will discuss something, it has no place on your slide set. Run spellcheck.
6. **Plan your delivery.** Practice, practice, practice. Know your slides well enough so that you are an expert at delivering them. Focus on telling the story of your presentation rather than reading the slides verbatim. Remember, the slides are there to supplement your discussion. Make sure you are enunciating key facts, using vocal intonation, and speaking without verbal fillers (ums, ahs, likes, and you knows will be all your audience focuses on if overused). Verify your timing is spot on by rehearsing your talk out loud, and never go over your allotted number of minutes.

7. **Keep your audience’s attention.** Even the smartest, best-intentioned humans have short attention spans. Ask questions and run polls to drive home a point. Plan for “breaks” every 5 minutes with humor, asking for a show of hands, or (short) anecdotes. To connect with your audience, come out from behind the dais, make eye contact, and smile.

8. **Don’t apologize for mistakes.** If you detect an error in your presentation, don’t even mention it. Saying sorry will just draw attention to it.

9. **Thank your team.** A successful presentation is the result of a team effort. It’s good practice to acknowledge and thank those who organized and executed the research you displayed as well as the people who made your talk possible.

10. **Answer questions.** Your talk doesn’t end with your last slide. Expect to be asked challenging questions and come prepared with answers. Always thank the person asking you a question, and don’t be afraid to ask for it to be repeated if you don’t fully understand. Never become defensive, and answer to the best of your knowledge.

In the end, a great presentation can be defined in several ways, and you don’t need to adhere to all of these pointers to give an effective talk. Some of the most inspiring presentations are well received because of their unconventional approach. Be authentic and play to your strengths. Know your subject matter thoroughly, be confident yet humble, and most important, have fun!