
How to make successful presentations

A presentation is a discourse on a discourse. That means you are supposed to comment in your own words on someone else's words. To do this successfully you need to clearly distinguish what *you are saying* on *what the source says* (book, article, film, material). Otherwise you will be unclear, boring and uninteresting to follow. If you do it too much, you will be merely digressing – not focusing enough on what is actually said, and your presentation will sound pretty artificial. If you do not, you will be making a summary in words of what people can more easily read or see by themselves. In both cases, your presentation is a failure. So don't miss this point : in a presentation you are not only summarizing the book ; you are *commenting* on it.

The first thing to do is to try and find a balance between the summary and your own comment, based on it. To make a good presentation you first need to outline the discourse (the story) and then turn it into a new object on which you then create your own discourse (your comment).

The first thing you need to do is:

1. Base your introduction on facts : what the story is about, where and when it is taking place (the historical context) and what is the author's aim (how he or she actually relate to it). Put the context first.
2. Then embed the story in the context you just outlined, it will give it life and objectivity (this way you are relating the discourse to the facts, and preparing your own comment on it).
3. Only then you can base your *own* discourse on the discourse, because you based the latter on facts and clearly differentiated them. There is the book says and what you will say on it.

You will then have to come up with a comparison between discourses and facts, i. e. you will have to consider your novel or your document as an aesthetic or analytical discourse (what was meant by the author, how he depicted it) and also as an historical fact (place it in the history of ideas, compare it with other similar works). **You have to distinguish between the story actually told in the book, and the story that the book is itself shaped in – and link them together.** This way you will create a discourse that places another discourse in its historical and diegetic¹ peculiarities. This will you will create interesting perspectives and successful presentations.

¹ Diegetic relates to the time described *within* the story (and not actual time).

Guidelines of a presentation

Thus, the best way to reach this is to proceed this way :

INTRODUCTION : introduce your topic, the author and its importance (reception, etc.). Directly state your author's perspective and objective while writing this book. The more precise you are, the more interesting it is (for instance : how the title was chosen or translated ; where the author is currently teaching ; about the author's career born in Paris but raised in India, and later went to Oxford ; at the time of publication, little attention was raised by this book ; the book received the Goncourt prize in 1996, the most sought-after award in France...). Explain the title.

WHAT IS YOUR POINT? : you need to clearly state an hypothesis that you are going to defend. Otherwise you will merely make a summary of the story, without realising you are not actually making a new discourse on the discourse. In other words, without such a project, your presentation is useless (as an academic exercise, that is. It still remains interesting as a subject of mundane discussion, but that's another story. It's just chit-chat.). **The point of your presentation is to demonstrate something, either in the discourse or in the facts.**

ANNOUNCE THE PLAN : this is critical, and very important. To keep the listener's attention you need to warm it. Otherwise it will go to sleep very quickly.

I.

SUMMARY OF THE TOPIC (20%) : you should always assume that your audience doesn't know at all what you are going to talk about in your presentation. What might make sense for you because it is your subject of thesis will be completely unknown or vaguely familiar to the audience. So be nice and make a nice summary of the facts, protagonists and events.

II.

CRITIQUE (20%) : this is a very simple yet very useful way of making your presentation interesting. Once you have described the discourse in itself (in the summary) and got your audience's attention you can now move to the 2nd most interesting part of your presentation. I. e. your own discourse on the discourse you just outlined. Make something original.

CONCLUSION : conclude on the originality of the book in the history of ideas and in the treatment of the facts it is based upon.

You have to *present* your work

You may have noticed that I only put 40% into the whole core of your presentation. That is because 60% of your whole presentation will be on the presentation itself, not on the contents. That is, if we don't understand what you're saying OR if we are not getting interested in what you're saying OR if we have to make an effort to understand the story for too long THEN your presentation will be a failure. A failure means : no questions after your speech except by very annoying experts ; no interest from the crowd that will only be wondering why they came to this place and (if that is not sufficiently convincing) ultimately a bad mark.

It is absolutely unacceptable that an act of communication called presentation has no presentation at all. You have to be open. You have to take this as a moment of share not as a moment of shame. Raise your voice, keep eye contact, talk to the crowd and leave your notes for a few seconds. Give us anecdotes – even personal experience, we will enjoy that. We are not scholars, we are first humans. And humans like to share personal matters much more than vain ideas. So talk to people and not to yourself. And don't read, talk to us directly. Glance at the whole audience, especially at the back.

If you know what a failure is, then guess what a success is. A successful presentation will be short, will focus on the story and yet raise interesting matters that talk to people – even remotely – so that they feel that someone was speaking to them, and not feel like they heard a chapter of a book. A successful presentation will raise many simple questions from many people, and laughs and smiles. Who thought that was possible from a boring academic exercise ?

To conclude

Finally, to help you improve your presentation you should always talk about your book/document to someone who's read/seen it before and ask about what they thought about it. This way you will have general ideas from non-specialists that will help you keep an objective view (sometimes you are so focused on your paper or critique that you forget about fundamental aspects of a book, such as who's narrating the story!).

And my second advice is, once you have written your presentation, ask yourself the questions you will be asked. Guess them so you will not forget anything important in your presentation – and so as to be ready in advance to nasty questions !

5 April 2008 – Baudry Rocquin

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