

# Practicing Your Presentation

By Dianna Booher

How necessary is rehearsal? The best of his day, Mark Twain had this to say: “It usually takes more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech.”

Reading from a full script, speaking from brief notes or an outline, and memorizing your speech—these are typically your delivery choices.

Speaking from notes or an outline is by far the superior method. On occasion, however, the other two options have merit. In complex presentations containing technical data difficult to learn, memorize, or summarize, you may resort to reading a prepared text for portions of the presentation. On other occasions, such as formal situations with legal implications, a formal statement that must be delivered precisely may be read.

## Reading from a Script

Nothing can lull an audience to sleep faster than hearing a presenter read a speech. In most instances the pros of reading a script (comfort to presenter, precise timing, fewer “goofs”) don’t outweigh the cons (little eye contact, lack of genuineness and intimacy, unnatural sound, immobility from the lectern). If, against all advice from the experts, you decide to read your presentation, here are some tips to make you more effective.

### ***Dictate the Text in One Sitting***

The process will be faster, and the tone will be more informal and appropriate. After you have a draft, you can polish it.

### ***Prepare Your Script for Reading by Marking It***

Double- or triple-space the text. Leave extra lines between paragraphs to signal yourself that you are finished with an idea. Use both upper- and lowercase letters; all uppercase words are more difficult to read.

Mark a single slash (/) to indicate a pause; mark a double slash (//) to indicate a longer pause. With a highlighting pen, mark key words and phrases that need emphasis. Choose certain colors to help you quickly grasp the layout of your ideas. For example, use green for basic key points, yellow for examples, red for statistics, and blue for transition and recap.

Leave the pages unstapled so that you can lay them aside easily as you finish reading each one. Do not break a sentence, paragraph, or list between two pages. Always number the pages. Insert margin notes for use of visuals, demonstrations, or other movements away from the lectern—all in the wide right-hand margins.

*Always* deliver your speech from the same copy you used for practice rather than a new copy with a different layout. Your mind will “photograph” chunks of text, and the first words of a paragraph will help your brain recall the rest.

### ***Check the Lighting at the Lectern or Table Beforehand***

Nothing perplexes a presenter like getting to the lectern to read a perfectly marked script only to discover that the lighting is so bad that either the main text appears only faintly or any colored highlighting fails to show up at all.

### ***Don't Try to Hide Your Script***

The audience will know that you are reading, so trying to hide the script will look deceptive and silly.

### ***Slow Down***

Be aware that you probably will read too quickly and will need to make a conscious effort to slow down. Make yourself notes on your script to do so.

### ***Concentrate on the Meaning Rather Than the Phrasing of Your Words***

Read with understanding. With concentration, your inflection, pauses, and gestures will improve.

## **Speaking from Key-Word Notes or an Outline**

Although there are exceptions, this is by far the most effective delivery method for the majority of presenters.

### ***Practice with a “Half and Half” Outline***

A practice outline is a detailed outline on multiple pages or cards. If you are using slides, the Notes View of your presentation software program allows you to put your outline directly beneath corresponding slides. However, I don't suggest starting your outline there because the tendency will be to build your entire presentation around your slideshow—a bad habit! The slideshow then becomes your presentation. Instead, start with an outline of key points. Then decide if and where you need a visual.

The benefit of such detail is a memory crutch for practice. The negatives are that you are likely to fumble with the pages during delivery and refer to the outline too frequently, losing eye contact with your audience, destroying credibility in the process. The half-and-half script combines features of a full script (opening, transition, and conclusion) with key words as memory joggers for main points. (See the example below for specifics.)

With this method, you write opening statements, transitions, and conclusions in polished form. Then you express the “meat” of each point using key words only. Such practice will keep your ideas spontaneous and fresh in delivery.

<i>5 min.</i>
<b>Transition:</b> “So, how can we dig our way out of the paperwork blizzard?”
3. Give your people a challenge. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Survey responses—28% “unchallenged”</li><li>• Anecdote—utility company</li><li>• Statistics from Garfield</li></ul>
<b>Conclusion:</b> “Clearly, our people should be able to volunteer for advisory committees.”

The “half and half” script provides structure and security while allowing flexibility and fresh phrasing. Use it for practice or delivery.

### ***Deliver Your Presentation with a Key-Word Outline***

For your actual delivery, construct an outline containing only key words that will trigger your memory with just a glance.

### ***Memorize the Opening, Transitions, and Closing***

The first and last few minutes have the highest impact. Memorizing your opening, transitions, and close allows you to look at your audience and deliver your points with conviction and freshness.

### ***Practice with Any Visuals or Demonstrations That You Plan to Use in Actual Delivery***

A mental walk-through will not do—even if you plan to use notes. You need to practice the timing. Additionally, actual practice with demonstrations or visuals often will reveal “gaps” either in your content or in your visuals—“builds” that should appear all at once or other confusing animation.

## **Memorizing Your Material**

The final presentation method is memorization. My suggestion is *not* to memorize anything longer than ten minutes. You’ll fear going blank, particularly if there are distractions. Memorization also makes the audience uneasy. At first, they marvel, then they worry whether you will make it to the end.

### ***Prepare a Written Text and Read It and Reread It and Reread It***

Practice from the same script, because your mind’s eye will “photograph” sections of pages to aid memorization. Repetition is your secret weapon.

### ***Break Your Script into Chunks***

Memorize one chunk at a time. Then, as you practice, recite the previously memorized chunks each day, and add on the newly learned one.

### ***Devise an Acronym or Other Mnemonic Device to Help with Recall***

Some people plan their shopping list this way; others, their to-do list. The use of acronyms or visual pictures (such as associating each floor of your executive suite with a concept or comparing a Halloween costume to parts of the marketing campaign) will keep you from going blank.

### ***Practice in Front of a Mirror***

You will be more likely to verify that you're retaining natural facial expressions and other appropriate gestures.

## **Learning—But Not Memorizing or Reading—Your Material**

### ***Read Your Outline or Practice Script Over and Over***

Read aloud to time yourself on each section, and record the times for each section in the margins. Connect the ideas using an acronym, and try to predict the next thought before your eyes catch the next prompt. Then practice in front of a mirror to see how often you are able to glance up from your notes.

### ***Memorize the Opening, Transitions, and Closing***

Memorization at these points will allow you to maintain eye contact at the most important times—when you are making a first impression (and your audience is deciding whether you are worth listening to) and at the conclusion (when they fix in their minds how good you were).

### ***Scrimmage—There's No Substitute***

A mental “walk through” alone will not do. Practice expressing your key ideas aloud, in complete sentences, and in the correct order. The time you spend on these drills will add polish and confidence to your actual presentation. Pay particular attention to your delivery of humorous anecdotes. They, more than any other part of your presentation, tend to succeed or fail based on delivery.

Video record yourself to become aware of your posture, gestures, and facial expressions. Then listen to the recording with your back to the screen to become more aware of your voice: your rate of speech, any tendency to let words trail off at the ends of sentences, mumbling, inflection, or poor diction. This aids you in deciding where to add emphasis and variety.

Rehearse again. Record again. Listen. Rehearse again. Record again. You will hear dramatic improvements with each trial run, and these improvements will build your confidence.

Finally, practice in front of friends, family, or colleagues, and solicit their feedback. If they're interested, your enthusiasm and confidence will grow. If their attention wanders, you need either more practice or better material!

Sure, scrimmaging seems like a waste of time on the front end. But the payoff is tremendous. Scrimmaging reveals gaps in your content in time for you to repair them. It helps you coordinate the visual support so that things flow more smoothly and you can concentrate on your transitions between points. It helps you polish your phrasing into catchy, attention-getting statements. And it builds your confidence. Your confidence then translates into energy, passion, and ultimately, credibility with the audience.

With a little editing, a little practice, and a little evaluation, your material and delivery will become so much a part of you that the ideas flow naturally and powerfully when you open your mouth.

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***Dianna Booher** works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of "21 Top Speakers for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its "Top 100 Thought Leaders" and "Top 100 Minds on Personal Development." [www.booher.com](http://www.booher.com) or call 800.342.6621.*

*For more tips on using visuals effectively, see Speak with Confidence: Powerful Presentations That Inform, Inspire and Persuade (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.*