

presentationzen

Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery

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Garr Reynolds

FOREWORD BY GUY KAWASAKI

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Praise for *Presentation Zen: Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery*, Third Edition

“It’s often the slim books that have the most impact. Strunk and White for proper English. *Robert’s Rules of Order* for running meetings. Both deceptively short, with huge impact. To these I find it easy to add *Presentation Zen* for moving an audience. Embrace this wonderful guide and gain the power of crafting simple and clear messages. Garr Reynolds provides techniques and examples in a manner that, quite naturally, adheres to the same principles as what he teaches.”

—**Ric Bretschneider**, Senior Program Manager,
Microsoft PowerPoint Development Team 1993–2010

“Garr is a beacon of hope for frustrated audiences everywhere. His design philosophy and fundamental principles bring life to messages and can invigorate careers. His principles of simplicity are as much a journey of the soul as they are restraint of the mouse.”

—**Nancy Duarte**, Principal, Duarte, Inc., and
author of *Resonate* and *DataStory*

“*Presentation Zen* changed my life and the lives of my clients. As a communications specialist, I was searching for a way to create visuals that support the narrative without detracting from the story. The philosophy and approach so elegantly explained in Garr’s book will inspire your audience. Don’t even think of giving another presentation without it!”

—**Carmine Gallo**, author of *The Presentation*
Secrets of Steve Jobs and *Talk Like TED*

“Garr has broken new ground in the way we think about the power of presentations, and more important, has taught an entire generation of communicators how to do a better job. Don’t miss this one.”

—**Seth Godin**, legendary presenter
and author of *This is Marketing*

“If you care about the quality and clarity of your presentations—and you should—pick up this book, read every page, and heed its wisdom. *Presentation Zen* is a contemporary classic.”

—**Daniel H. Pink**, author of
Drive and *A Whole New Mind*

“Four years ago, Garr’s *Presentation Zen* literally changed the world of communications. Almost overnight, what was once fluffy, stale, and boring became sharp, brisk, and even (can we say it?) fun. A million radically-improved speeches later, the world is ready for a refresher—and just when we need it most, Garr delivers the magic again.”

—**Dan Roam**, author of *Draw To Win* and
The Back of the Napkin

Contrasts Are Compelling

Whether we are talking about graphic design or the components of a story, the principle of contrast is one of the most fundamental and important elements to include. Contrast is about differences, and we are hardwired to notice differences. You can see the principle of contrast everywhere in good storytelling, including filmmaking. For example, in *Star Wars IV*, there is obviously compelling contrast between the good and noble Rebel Alliance and the dark side of the Death Star and the evil empire. Yet great contrasts exist even between main characters in the story who are on the same side. The young, naïve, idealistic Luke Skywalker character contrasts with the old, wise, and realistic Obi-Wan Kenobi. The level-headed, diplomatic, young Princess Leia contrasts with the slightly cocky, irreverent, older Han Solo. These characters are compelling to millions of fans because of their inherent contrasts and the series of negotiations they go through as they deal with their differences. Even R2-D2 and C-3PO are engaging characters, in large part because of their strikingly different personalities. In your own presentations, look for contrasts such as before/after, past/future, now/then, problem/solution, strife/peace, growth/decline, pessimism/optimism, and so on. Highlighting contrasts is a natural way to bring the audience into your story and make your message more memorable.

Using Storytelling Principles in Presentations

You do not always have a lot of time to prepare your presentation or perhaps it is difficult to see what the story is, so here are three simple steps you can use to prepare virtually any presentation relatively quickly.

Basic elements to include in your story:

1. *Identify the problem.* (This could be a problem, for example, that your product solves.)
2. *Identify causes of the problem.* (Give actual examples of the conflict surrounding the problem.)
3. *Show how and why you solved the problem.* (This is where you provide resolution to the conflict.)

Essentially, that's it: Introduce the problem you have (or did have) and how you will solve it (or did solve it). Give examples that are meaningful and relevant to your audience. Remember, story is sequential: "This happened, and then this happened, and therefore this happened, and so on." Take people on a journey that introduces conflict and then resolves that conflict. If you can do this, you will be miles ahead of most presenters who simply recall talking points and broadcast lists of information. Audiences tend to forget lists and bullet points, but stories come naturally to us; it's how we've always attempted to understand and remember the bits and pieces of experience. Robert McKee's point is that you should not fight your natural inclination to frame experiences into a story; instead, embrace this and tell the story of your experience of the topic to your audience.

Stories and Emotions

Our brains tend to recall experiences or stories that have a strong emotional element to them. The emotional components of stories are what helps them be remembered. Earlier this year, four students in my Japanese labor management class did a presentation on employment security in Japan. Three days later, when I asked other students to recall the most salient points of the presentation, what they remembered most vividly were not the labor laws, the principles, and the changes in the labor market in Japan but, rather, the topic of *karoshi*, or death from overwork, and the issue of suicides in Japan, topics that were quite minor points in the hour-long presentation. Perhaps five minutes out of the hour were spent on the issue of *karoshi*, but that's what the audience remembered most. It's easy to understand why. The issue of death from overworking and the relatively high number of suicides are extremely emotional topics that are not often discussed. The presenters cited actual cases and told stories of people who died as a result of *karoshi*. The stories and the connections they made with the audience caused these relatively small points to be remembered because emotions such as surprise, sympathy, and empathy were all triggered.

Kamishibai: Lessons in Visual Storytelling from Japan

Kamishibai is a form of visual and participatory storytelling that combines the use of hand-drawn visuals with the engaging narration of a live presenter. *Kami* (紙) means “paper” and *shibai* (芝居) means “play/drama.” The origins of *kamishibai* can be traced back to various picture storytelling traditions in Japan, which include *etoki* and *emaki* scrolls and other forms of visual storytelling dating back centuries. However, the form of *kamishibai* that one thinks of today developed around 1929 and was popular in the 1930s, and ’40s, all but dying out with the introduction of television later in the 1950s. Typical *kamishibai* consisted of a presenter who stood to the right of a small wooden box or stage that held the 12–20 cards featuring the visuals that accompanied each story. This miniature stage was attached to the storyteller’s bicycle, from which he sold candy to the small children who gathered before the show (this was originally how the storyteller could make a little money). The presenter changed the cards by hand, varying the speed of the transition to match the flow of the story he was telling. The best *kamishibai* presenters did not read the story, but instead kept their eyes on the audience and occasionally on the current card in the frame.



Kamishibai is as different from picture books as modern presentation visuals are different from documents. In the case of a picture book, there can be more visual details and text. However, picture books are usually read alone unlike *kamishibai* which is designed to be presented in front of a larger group gathered around the presenter and his visuals.

Although *kamishibai* is a form of visual storytelling that became popular more than 80 years ago, the lessons from this craft can be applied to modern multimedia presentations. Tara McGowan, who wrote *The Kamishibai Classroom* (Libraries Unlimited), says that *kamishibai* visuals are more like the frames in a movie: “*Kamishibai* pictures are designed to be seen only for a few [moments], so extraneous details detract from the story and open up the possibilities of misinterpretation.” It’s important to design each card, she says, “...to focus the audience’s attention on characters and scenery that are most important at any given moment. If clarity and economy of expression are the goals, it would be hard to find a more perfect medium.” It’s easy to imagine how we can apply the same spirit of *kamishibai* to our modern-day presentations that include the use of multimedia and a screen. Here are five tips from *kamishibai* that we can apply to our presentations today:

1. Visuals should be big, bold, clear, and easy to see.
2. Allow graphic elements to fill the frame and bleed off the edges.
3. Use visuals in an active way, not a decorative one.
4. Aim to carefully trim back the details.
5. Make your presentation—visuals and narration—participatory.



Stories and Authenticity

I have seen pretty good (though not great) presentations with average delivery and graphics that were relatively effective because the speaker told relevant stories in a clear, concise manner to support his points in a voice that was human, not formal. Rambling streams of consciousness will not get it done; audiences need to hear (and see) your points illustrated in real language.

A few years ago, I saw a fantastic presentation by the CEO of one of the most famous foreign companies in Japan. The CEO's slides were of mediocre design, and he made the mistake of having not one but two assistants off to the side to advance his slides to match his talk. The assistants seemed to have difficulty with the slideware, and often the wrong slide appeared behind the presenter, but this powerful man simply shrugged his shoulders and said "...ah, doesn't matter. My point is..." He moved forward and captivated the audience with his stories of the firm's past failures and recent successes, stories that contained more captivating and memorable practical business lessons than most business students will get in an entire semester or more.

It is true that the presentation would have been even better if the slides had been better designed and used properly, but in this particular case, the CEO gave a powerful and memorable presentation in spite of those shortcomings. Trust me, this is very rare in the world of Chief Executive presentations. There are four essential reasons for his success that night:

1. He knew his material inside and out, and he knew what he wanted to say.
2. He stood front and center and spoke in a real, down-to-earth language that was conversational yet passionate.
3. He did not let technical glitches get in his way. When they occurred, he moved forward without missing a beat, never losing his engagement with the audience.
4. He used real, sometimes humorous, anecdotes to illustrate his points, and all his stories were supremely poignant and relevant, supporting his core message.

What made this leader's presentation so compelling and memorable was that it was, above all, authentic. His stories were from his heart and from his gut, not from a memorized script. We do not tell a story from memory alone; we do not need to memorize a story that has meaning to us. If it is real, then it is in us. Based on our research, knowledge, and experience, we can tell it from our gut. Internalize your story, but do not memorize it line by line. You can't fake it. You believe in your story, or you do not. And if you do not, no amount of hyped-up, superficial enthusiasm or conviction will ever make your time with an audience meaningful. If you do not believe it, do not know it to be true, how can you connect and convince others with your words in story form? Your words will be hollow.

