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**How to kill your presentation – a practical guide for the uninterested**

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*'To die, to sleep'*

*(William Shakespeare)*

Demosthenes (384–322 BC,) learned how to speak in public by observing great orators. He began his speaking career at the age of 20 and he made his living as a professional speech-writer. Of course, he could not use any electronic device so he had to rely solely on his own talent and on his ability to phrase his ideas in such a way that 2 000 years later he is still famous. Very few physicians have the ability of Demosthenes, and thus, all too often the formal oral presentation at a medical convention can be a real disaster. A medical presentation may have to include data sometimes as boring as the innervations of the small muscles of the hand or the sequence of the various factors in the coagulation cascade. Anaesthesiologists are not the only people who transfer people from a fully awake state into a deep sleep. This transformation can be induced at any time of the day in many people (lets call them an 'audience') as they sit in the lecture hall. The fact that the lights are dim (in fact, sometimes the audience is in full darkness) and the speaker talks in a monotonous dull voice and displays blue letters on a black background just contribute to the readiness of the most devoted listener to have this divine feelings of Morpheus engulfing his blessed hands and ... there he is, having his first rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. In our profession sooner or later we shall have to present the findings of a study, describe to our peers a case that did not work out well enough or, in order to have our travel expenses reimbursed, participate in a panel 6 000 miles from home. So it is necessary for every doctor to be able to prepare and deliver a talk so at the end here won't be any need to administer drugs for reversal....

Occasionally one attends a talk where the speaker seems intent to spend a period of between 20 and 45 minutes avoiding any communication. Perhaps the data were not good enough or the results differed from the claims made in the abstract submitted 10 months earlier. He/she succeeds in avoiding communication by using slides that cannot be read from any distance, or by loading each slide with so much information that it will be above and beyond the ability of human beings to read it, let alone understand it. It is, indeed, easy to kill any presentation in this manner. One can also kill a talk without the aid of technology by sitting at the table in front of your listeners and reading the talk from the paper, preferably in a monotonous quiet voice. You can even just read the same page over and over again from beginning to end and the chances that someone will discover that you are doing so is very slim. Thus, it is really simple to kill a presentation. Therefore, I shall now go into the more complicated methods of preparing a successful PowerPoint presentation, this time in order not to destroy your presentation but rather transform a possibly boring topic into a really exciting and memorable story. Please follow me as I lead you through the few steps that will make your presentation truly successful. You will then be on the road to fame and invitations to conferences all over the globe will rain on you.

*Be prepared!*

*(Robert Baden-Powell - founder of the Boy Scouts)*

I assume that you have all the data, numbers and messages you want to deliver. I assume that you are an expert on the topic you are going to talk about or at least Googled the relevant literature so you have a great advantage over the audience in order to persuade them to accept your ideas and believe you. In order to do so you have to make the necessary preparations in order to improvise. This may sound like an oxymoron (or contradiction) but it is essential to pay attention to detail and rehearse. (Woody Allen worked on his first spontaneous stand up comedy for more than 2 years - so learn from him). From the cognitive point of view it is known that pictures and words are better than just words, especially if pictures and words are adjacent to each other. The processing system of the human being (such as one of your listeners) consists of auditory and visual processes.

## The KISS principle

There are some limits in our ability to process or absorb a huge amount of data, and the preparation of each slide should be based on the KISS principle ("keep it simple, stupid!"). Avoid using all of the effects supplied by your computer program. Too many objects moving simultaneously on your slide will prove that you know how to operate PowerPoint but will interfere with the simple message you want to discuss. Thus, if you discuss 'The use of muscle relaxants in trauma care' showing moving needles and muscle contractions will direct attention to the virtuosity of your handling the show and prevent the audience from understanding what you really have to say. There is no point in adding all kinds of small moving creatures at the bottom of the slide, like the dog that we hate from the 'help' menu of Windows. Instead of concentrating on the main point you are trying to make, the audience will busily try to avoid this distraction.

As a car driver always looks forward through the front window, so the speaker should always look at the audience and never, ever focus his gaze on the screen, reading for us what we hopefully can read for ourselves. Drivers usually sit at the steering wheel but speakers should stand (sitting during a talk is peculiar to those who have to read from paper long essays full of details, like at a conference on the history of some remote event in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, sitting means you do not respect your audience, so no wonder they simply leave their own seats and go out). The PowerPoint presentation should not be used as notes for the speaker, it can help but PowerPoint should be used as a sophisticated blackboard and so use multimedia as an additional tool.

When you prepare your presentation at the office or at home, the slides will look great on the computer screen but try to turn the lights up to maximum in your study and then look at your screen from a distance of few metres. If you are not able to read from the text on the screen then Mr X in row 8 will also not be able to read the text. There are some neglected basic rules which apply to preparation of a decent slide: not more than 10 words per picture, fonts big enough, and the background should not be the same colour as the lettering, if a picture is being used then it should be of a good quality, (it is not good to show just pixels instead of a real picture) and use a dark background so as not to shed too much light on the picture with the projector's lights. (All these issues will be demonstrated during my talk). Information to guide you in choosing the proper color and the background can be located at <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/powerpoint>. Do not just ignore the information that appears on this site.

At every conference, where the organisers do not review presentations in advance to create a uniform, well prepared show, one can rate the presentations according to the bad selection of colors and fonts and the heavily loaded information tables. My own preference is black letters on a white background (or, if the screen at the conference has a spot light that can not be turned off and is directed towards it, then white letters on a black background will solve the problem. I once disconnected the spot light and the next year I discovered that it was still disconnected). There are well established rules as to the number of words per slide (not more than 10), the number of rows (not more than three) and the use of tables (graphs are much better). Pictures added to the presentation may suffer if they are not of a very good quality. Whenever you choose to download a picture from the internet, try to choose the one which is really 'heavy' (the number of megabytes). A picture that is only 17k may show something completely different after enlargement on the screen. Inserting a video requires few steps and some basic knowledge; every practitioner can learn this and there is no need to stop a presentation and struggle with a DVD program or press an arrow on a media player. The talk must be smooth and delivered without pauses (for example, "let me have few seconds, just to fix this problem, it will take a few seconds"). There is no point in using a video clip that on the screen will look like moving rectangles in colors - downloading from a poor source on the internet is a recipe for may be hearing, but not seeing. The proper way to do it is to copy from your camera, DVD or other digital source into a program that can transfer it into the format that PowerPoint can handle. Then all you have to do is to 'add, movie from file', enlarge it and add a black background (as essential for movies as it is for pictures) and ask the programme to start the video automatically.

Do not insert all kinds of arrows and knobs to guide you from one slide to another. During your lecture you will be too busy to operate a delicate mouse, or to look at the keyboard. A small remote control that simply does only 'forward' and 'backward' is all that is required. It is easy to control the volume of the speakers (check that they are connected!).

Rehearse and check your presentation at home to see if it meets the time limit given to you. Check that all the slides are readable, that there are none upside down, and that you are ready for the worst - namely that the projector and laptop do not communicate with each other or another technical problem. If this happens do not wait for a repair, just start to talk as if you are ready to give your presentation without the machine. (This is a good advice but it is my worst nightmare and is why I carry my own laptop, projector, screwdriver, extension cables as well as international adaptors to my lectures).

Try to prepare a talk at home, for example on 'Anaesthesia at high altitude'. You have 20 minutes. The audience is the staff of your department. Can you do it so that everyone is still awake at the end?

### **Key Learning Points**

- It is essential to prepare your presentation based on the ability of the audience to read the text – use a white background, black and bold lettering, with no more than four rows of text in a slide
- Do not use items that distract the audience from the main message (like those little icons that circulate or move constantly)
- Talk to the audience, not to the screen!
- Prepare your movies and embed them in the slide.
- Keep it simple.
- Rehearse.