

Question: What makes a good presenter?

Videos watched

https://www.ted.com/talks/thomas_goetz_it_s_time_to_redesign_medical_data

https://www.ted.com/talks/abraham_verghese_a_doctor_s_touch

Identity

Thomas Goetz is a former editor of Wired magazine, which is a technology publication. He has a background in public health, and when he left Wired he formed his own company called Iodine, which is a digital health startup. He has also published a book called The Decision Tree about taking charge of our own health.

Abraham Verghese was raised at a mission hospital in Ethiopia of Indian parents, and this experience provided the inspiration for his bestselling novel, Cutting For Stone. He has written a number of other works of fiction. He is a medical doctor and professor at Stanford

General appearance

Goetz has a very casual style, with a woolen jacket, jeans and sneakers, which is in keeping with the environment in which he worked at the time of recording.

Verghese dresses a little more snappily, but without going as far as the formal suit and tie.

Although you might find it unjust to be judged on how you look, it is something we face every day in every situation, whether it be in a stressful situation such as a job interview or simply on social media. The image you project is fundamental. Slides are also judged on how they look, and you should aim to look as professional as your slides.

In the mid-2000s the BBC produced a fashion show in which a volunteer underwent an interview with a psychologist and every day for one week, a fashion expert left an outfit for the person to wear while going about their daily business. These choices were related to things that the participant had spoken about to the psychologist. So, for example, one week a woman who was a bit bored of just being a mother had to wear outfits including a clown costume, and a latex figure-hugging pantsuit. Needless to say, this left quite an impression on both the volunteer and the viewers. What this TV show revealed, was that not only does what you wear affect how others see you, it also changes the way you behave and perceive yourself.

If you tend to feel nervous, having a special outfit reserved for presentations can be a way of leaving your stage-fright at the stage door, and slipping into another persona for the duration of your presentation.

Voice (tone, speed etc.)

Goetz seems to have a slightly excitable tone, the pitch seems to go up and down sometimes, independently of meaning. He delivers his words rather quickly, sometimes stumbling over words. He pronounces inundate as “unindate” at one point. Indeed, a rough calculation puts him at approximately 200 words per minute, which is well over the 150 words per minute that audiobooks are generally recorded at. He also *ums* and *ahs* a lot, a verbal sign of nerves.

Verghese seems much calmer and speaks at a rate of about 170 words per minute. His tone is more constant but not monotone, and the dynamics of his speech seem less exaggerated. He comes across as an accomplished public speaker, and one of the features which contributes to this impression is the lack of interjections denoting hesitation. On the contrary, Verghese uses pauses to great effect (see below).

The tone of your voice can convey many things. It can betray nervousness, so playing with an enthusiastic tone can help limit the problem of a shaky voice, which if left unchecked can spread to the rest of your body, and completely spoil the presentation, leaving you deflated.

Debit is also important. Someone that speaks too quickly will fail to articulate all the words they use, making some parts less comprehensible than others. Audiobooks are generally recorded at approximately 150 words per minute, since this is thought to be an ideal speed at which 100% of the information can be assimilated. You may be slightly slower or faster, but this should be a guide to help you plan how much detail you can afford to pack into your presentation.

Mozart allegedly said that the music is not in the notes, but in the silence between them. In a presentation silence also has a role to play, since you will never speak without stopping, even just for the briefest of moments. Often speakers will insert 'um' or 'ah' (or even a French word) when they hesitate, and this is perfectly natural. However, a polished performance will not contain a single utterance of this type, because the speaker has learned to use silence. Silence is extremely powerful. It not only gives the speaker time to collect his thoughts, but it also allows him or her to check that the audience have understood, and make sure that it is not necessary to go back and explain something again.

Eyes

At the beginning of his presentation Goetz maintains good eye contact with the audience, sweeping across the room, but the viewer notices that as the presentation progresses Goetz looks more and more frequently at his feet, and less at the audience. The reason for this is that there are screens at his feet on which he can see his slides. This suggests that he may have been better prepared for the beginning of his presentation. Given that an audience will judge the initial impression and the final impression, it is important to prepare everything equally well.

Verghese maintains eye contact from beginning to end, apart from the short reading at the end.

Occasionally a presentation will be spoiled by a speaker who has their back to the audience. Not only does this prevent the sound from carrying the way the auditorium acoustics were designed to make it carry, but the audience will feel cut off from the speaker, and this is likely to increase the chances that nobody asks any questions at the end of the presentation.

If you have a setup where the computer is in front of you, and you can see the screen as the images are projected, you have no excuse, and should face the audience. If this is not the case, then it is a good idea to position yourself at roughly 45° to the projection screen, so that you can see the slides out of the corner of your eye while facing the audience. This allows you to maintain eye contact with the audience. Your eyes should slowly travel around the audience, occasionally stopping briefly, with the aim to convey the impression that you are addressing each member of the audience individually. In some cases, the lack of lighting above the audience will mean that you can't possibly see each person, but they can see you.

Hands

Goetz holds the laser pointer with one hand but does not always seem to know what to do with the other. Sometimes he makes wide gestures, sometimes he folds his arm across his body, and sometimes it is on his hip.

Vergheze uses his hands in a meaningful way, to amplify or illustrate what he is saying. For example, he talks of touch, of the chest, and so on, each time making the related gesture.

It is never easy to know what to do with one's hands. Most people don't feel comfortable having them just dangle at the side, so it is important to have an idea of how to proceed. You might have planned to hold your notes, for example. However, if you do so, any nervous shakes are transmitted to the notes, and amplified. In any case, with good slides you should not need notes.

We should also avoid putting hands in our pockets. There may be a set of keys in there, or some coins, and even if the pocket is empty it looks casual, bordering on lackadaisical, which is not how we want to be viewed in a professional context.

Stray or loose hands often end up nervously scratching some part of the body, so we need to find a way to occupy them.

Nowadays we use laser pointers, which not only allow us to point to things on our slides (which can be extremely useful when presenting illustrations) but also allow us to advance through the slide deck. This should keep one hand busy.

The second hand can be steadied by placing it on a podium, if there is one. Alternatively, it can contribute to your presentation by being moved in a meaningful way to illustrate a concept, for instance, or to emphasize something important.

Feet & body

Goetz seems to move around a little more than is necessary, and at times it can be distracting.

Vergheze limits his movement to one step to each side, turning slightly to maintain his eye contact with the audience. In TED conferences there is always a designated square or circle in which the speaker is asked to remain so that those responsible for the lighting and film cameras do not have to permanently adjust the positions.

Sometimes you come across presenters who pace back and forth across the stage, spoiling a perfectly good presentation. This makes the speaker appear nervous (and therefore less professional or competent), it distracts the audience, and can play havoc with the acoustics. It would be just as unnatural for someone to stand in one place, rigid and upright. What is required is controlled movement.

If you remember the ted.com videos, you will have noticed that there is usually a red square or circle outside which the speakers are not supposed to set foot. This is because of the lighting and the cameras. It is also a great way to avoid the problems of excessive motion.

A good speaker will generally limit movement to one or two steps to either side and accompany this with hip rotation allowing eye-contact to be maximised.