

Excerpts from The Compelling Communicator

By Tim Pollard

PART ONE – Understanding the Skill We Need to Master

Chapter 1 – A Problem Worth Solving

Every presentation is ultimately about getting action. We present for a reason; we want people to do something.

Chapter 2 – Why Do We Present So Poorly

The real reason we present badly is because we don't know the rules that govern great communication. We use bulleted slides as a visual. Don't do that ever.

When everything the speaker says is on a slide, audiences quickly identify that pattern of presenting, and without realizing it, default to the screen, scanning and reading the bullets, inevitably getting ahead of the speaker.

You are no longer the star, the screen is the star and you've become the disembodied sound track.

The single biggest key to extraordinary communication is one simple idea: Whenever you communicate, what you are trying to do is: Powerfully land a small number of big ideas.

The human brain doesn't do very well at storing and retrieving facts and data, especially large quantities of facts and data. But the brain traffics very well in ideas.

Everything we do as presenters needs to be about finding and nailing those big ideas. When you give an audience the big idea that emerges from your data rather than just the data, it's exactly what the reductionist brain wants.

Many presentations follow a pattern of long on facts, but short on insight. Instead of fully landing a small number of big ideas, they weakly land a larger number of trivial ones.

Chapter 3 – The Heart of the Matter is the Brain

The brain stores information contextually. In order to store new information, the brain must connect the information to something it already knows, and if that connection isn't there, your brain has a big storage problem.

Whenever you're designing a presentation and you simply "organize" your ideas into bullets, but with no other structure, the outcome is guaranteed forgetability.

Chapter 4 – Design vs Delivery

Most people have come to associate effective communication with effective delivery.

But surveys reveal that delivery is not as important as the design of the content of the presentation.

In your own presentations, if you find yourself saying the words, “Why am I telling you this?”, that’s a great moment. Why? Because it sends a signal that out of the data or illustration you’ve shown, insight is about to be taught.

There is one word that anchors almost everything you need to know about delivery, and that word is *precision*. The presentation you deliver needs to be exactly what you designed.

When it comes to great communication, it’s content that captivates. When we focus on content delivery but neglect content design, we are shooting at the wrong target.

Chapter 5 – The Carbon Atom

Presentation design is about asking and answering a series of questions that govern everything that follows, such as:

- What is the action I want from this presentation?
- What argument will most likely get me to that outcome?
- What is the right flow of that argument?
- What are my big ideas and how am I going to land them in the most compelling way?

On Paper or Online? Your Decision

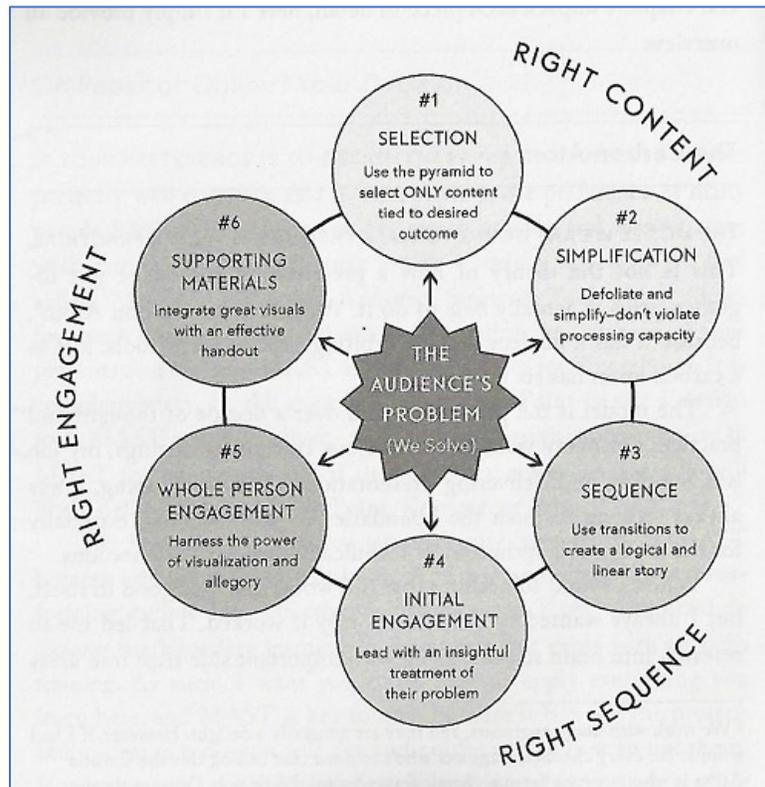
There is nothing wrong with PowerPoint, but it isn’t a design tool because it doesn’t ask you a single one of these questions.

If your preference is to design on paper that’s okay. Or, you may prefer working in a software tool called “MAST,” or Message Architect Software Tool, which allows much easier editing, revision, collaboration, and storage of your presentation designs.

MAST is not a substitute for PowerPoint, it is complementary. In the same way PowerPoint is not a design tool, MAST is not a delivery tool.

The Carbon Atom

The model we are going to walk through is highly practical. This is not the theory of how a presentation should be put together – this is actually *how* to do it. We call it the Carbon Atom, because it has a nucleus and six orbiting process steps/tools, just as a carbon atom has six elements.



As you look at the model, the first thing you notice is what sits at the center.

Every presentation is “about” something. A good presenter orients around the audience, and specifically the audience’s problem that we are preparing to solve.

There are three fundamental things in the design of the presentation itself, which you see around the perimeter of the model. We need:

1. The right content
2. The right sequence
3. With the right engagement, a.k.a. as “stickiness”

Right Content Selection

The first step in presentation design is to select the right content and the key idea here is relevance. It is truly shocking just how much of the material in most presentations is completely irrelevant to the presentation’s desired outcome.

The most central question you need to answer is: "In this presentation, what are my big ideas?"

If we are trying to powerfully land a small number of big ideas, then the defining question of any presentation design has to be: What are those ideas and where do they come from?

Right Sequence

Your goal is to take your raw content and create a logical and elegant narrative flow, such that "A" leads to "B" leads to "C" and so on, with the result that every piece makes sense because of the context that was set up by the piece that preceded it.

The presentation must be anchored in your audience's problem, so we need to open with the one thing most likely to secure both the audience's attention and their commitment to the rest of the conversation. That thing is them, and more specifically, the problem they have that your going to solve.

Right Engagement: Supporting Materials

For any presentation to be declared successful, it must live on after the presentation. Its big ideas need to stick; they need to be remembered, retold, and acted upon in the days and weeks to come.

How does that happen? In every presentation, the speaker uses some blend of three tools:

1. Their narrative
2. Their visuals
3. And the handout they give to the audience

It is the correct use of and interaction between these three things that creates long-term stickiness, and of particular importance is the handout or leave-behind.

Chapter 6 – A Vision of the Future

Your future presentations will have seven critical elements:

1. Is thoroughly audience-centric
2. Pivots on a small number of big ideas
3. Has a logical narrative flow
4. Is crisp, simple, and easy to understand
5. Is engaging and interesting – rather than simply facts and data, it lights up the right-brain
6. Has a valuable handout, facilitating the story's ability to live on after the meeting
7. Leads naturally to action

The goal of our process is to create messages that can be “retold,” and the reason this matters so much is because of the typical time lag between when presentations are made and when decisions are made.

They’re Gonna Talk About You When You’re Gone

The issue of presentation “retellability” is critical in all settings and is perhaps the single most important issue in sales messaging. You need to understand that our most important sales presentations happen when we aren’t in the room. And only those messages that have penetrated the brain in a special way can be retold.

PART TWO – Mastering the Presentation Design

Chapter 8 – Developing the Heart of Your Argument

What is the Problem? The Search for Relevance

In a sea of potential content, what is actually relevant? What is the heart of the presentation I’m designing? Put another way, if every presentation is about “powerfully landing a small number of big ideas,” what are those big ideas, where do they come from?

Almost all presentations contain a ton of material that the audience doesn’t actually need to know. Somewhere between 50% to 70% of the material in a typical presentation simply isn’t needed.

The Essential Solution: Start with the Action

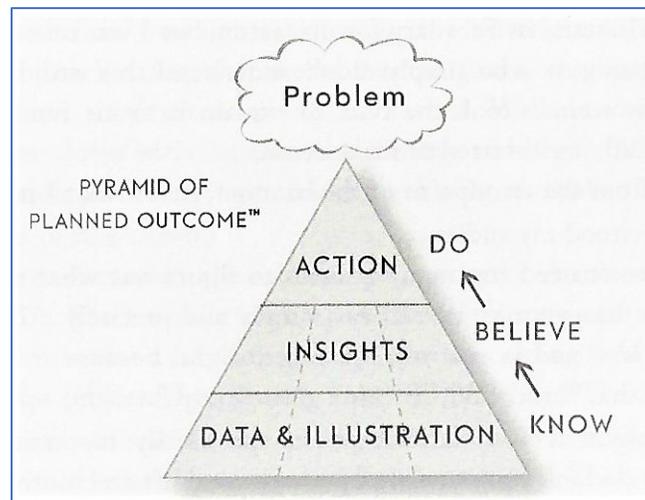
The way you solve this problem is by fundamentally changing your start point. Sender-centricity starts with the question: “What do I want to say.”

In contrast, relevance comes from starting with the action you want your audience to take, and working back from there.

1. Hence, the new first question is: **What is the desired outcome of this presentation?**
2. From which naturally flows the second question: **Exactly what argument (content, structure, illustration) will get me to that outcome?**

You always want your audience to do something, even if it’s only mental assent. Since this action is the purpose of the presentation, make sure you know what it is.

The Pyramid of Planned Outcome



As you begin to build any presentation, you start with this question: “As a result of this presentation, what do I want my audience to do?” This is the top of the pyramid, and you fill the action in there. Remember, your audience, is also self-interested: they will act because it helps them; not because it helps you.

In human beings, action is preceded by belief. In other words, we make a decision when we have established certain beliefs about that decision.

If action is preceded by belief, “What does my audience need to believe in order to take the action I want them to take?” Those beliefs are your presentation’s big ideas; this is where they come from. And if you look in the dictionary, what is the definition of a conclusion you draw for the first time when presented with new information? An insight.

How many insights can you have? Around three or four. In fact, I favor three in most presentations because the brain loves concepts structured in threes. I’m not overly dogmatic about whether it’s three or four, because the point is: it’s not ten. If you think you have ten big ideas, you don’t have any.

Finally, we descend to the bottom level. If insight leads to action, the question that logically follows is: “What leads to insight?” And the answer is simple: knowledge, which comes from data and illustration.

The data and illustration points in each lower box are designed to prove the insight that sits directly above them, and we call this vertical slice of the pyramid an “insight path.” Any presentation is simply a logical series of insight paths. You address one insight, nail it, and move on to the next.”

Down at the level of data and illustration, always remember that the goal isn’t quantity, it’s quality. The best arguments are made by focusing on a small number

of highly load-bearing proofs, not by assembling every possible data point you can lay your hands on. Audiences quickly become lost if you try to prove an insight with too much data.

Chapter 9 – Making it Simpler (Your Audience has Limits)

How many presenters, in a desperate attempt to connect with an audience they don't really understand, simply throw all the mud they can at the wall hoping that something will stick?

The Brain Violation: The Inviolable Principle of Audience Bandwidth

Your audience has a finite capacity to absorb information, and when you overload that limit, they shut down.

The brain processes new information with "working memory." We can think of working memory as the brain's first port of call for new information, so it's what you use to process what you're seeing, hearing, smelling and so on. The problem is, working memory is extremely limited.

You must not exceed the brain's capacity to absorb, and because this is truly a biological limitation, it's not a rule you can bend simply because you feel like it. When you overload an audience with information, the audience is not giving up because it's irritated and doesn't want to follow, it's giving up because it can't follow.

The Essential Solution: Disciplined Defoliation

The good news is as a speaker you are never forced to overload your audience with too much information. Data dumping on your audience is not a matter of necessity; it is a matter of self-discipline. Every story can be told within working-memory limitations.

Defoliation is the practical exercise of stripping out everything that isn't necessary, so we can be left with only the most valuable material.

"The designer has achieved perfection, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there's nothing left to take away." Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Start with Proportion

In a battle to reduce quantity, the place to start is with proportion, or how much time each section of your presentation merits. Most presenters don't think about relative importance nearly enough. They typically assign about the same amount of time to each point.

Great communicators design proportion into their talks. They linger where the audience wants them to linger, and quickly move through points that are less interesting. There is something highly rewarding to an audience when the presenter breezes through the trivial but digs into the meaty.

There are three rules for reducing sheer quantity.

Rule #1: Critical content only

Sharply focus on your most important ideas, while jettisoning all the secondary content that may be interesting but that you can't afford to include.

Rule #2: Ruthlessly Eliminate Repetition

Most presenters repeat themselves for too much. They will often use multiple stories to illustrate a single point, or lots of data that shows the same thing. Don't do that.

Rule #3: Be as Brief as Possible

Finally, within the stories you tell, be minimalist and concise. Interesting sidebars and intellectual eddies are where presentations go to die.

Your New Best Friend: The Appendix

In fighting to pull out everything that's secondary, your new best friend is the appendix. We recommend that in addition to a primary handout, presenters should build an appendix containing their secondary material.

The existence of an appendix allows you to create a beautifully focused core argument, supported by a simple, focused core document.

Minimize Complexity

Most people present within their own area of expertise, where everything they are talking about is completely familiar to them. But they fail to spot the complexity that may be as innocent as one acronym, that can derail an audience less fluent with the subject matter. We call this problem, "Complexity Blindness."

The longer you've spoken the language of your tribe, the harder it is even to notice that this isn't the language of the tribe that you're presenting to.

So how do we solve Complexity Blindness? Again there are three essential rules.

Rule #1: Intentionally scrutinize for simplicity.

Carefully review all your content for complexity. The golden rule of technical presentations is this: The conclusions from the data are significantly more important than the details of the data.

Rule #2: Draw the conclusions for the audience

Tell your audience what your work means for them. Do not ask them to do the highly difficult job of identifying your insights. That's your job.

You can never assume that your audience will draw the conclusions you think they will draw, no matter how obvious they seem to you.

Rule #3: Be careful to use audience language and be particularly careful with unexplained terms.

Technical terms and acronyms are probably the worst land mines of the battlefield of hidden complexity. We need to always remember that people don't like it when you use terms or acronyms that they don't understand.

There's a sobering principle to be aware of here for anyone selling their ideas: people don't buy what they don't understand.

Chapter 10: Getting From the "Stuff" to the Story

We now turn to the task of taking the material and finding the overarching storyline that's hidden within it. It's a critical step in the design of any presentation.

The Problem: Topic-Driven Narratives

Most presentations do not progress along a logical, linear path, or certainly not one that's clear enough. What most often happens, is the speaker uses a "topic-driven" narrative where the speaker moves from one topic to the next without any discernable storyline that holds everything together. The topics may be good, but there's nothing that connects them.

The Solution: Audience-Centric Sequencing

Your presentation should arrive at a question the exact moment that question arrives in the audience's mind.

In any presentation I witness, I love hearing the phrase, "You're probably wondering," because it tells me that the presenter has thought about, and is explicitly tracking with, the audience's logic.

So how do you figure out what's in your audience's head? It really isn't that difficult.

- You are going to present a point.
- That point will naturally raise a thought or question in the audience's mind.
- Think about what that question might be.
- Having identified it, name it, and make sure the next thing you do is answer it.

Clearly any point you make might trigger a range of possible questions in the audience. As long as you've identified a reasonable question, the flow of your presentation will make total sense and the audience will still track with you.

Identifying the audience's questions naturally creates your transitions to your next major point.

Write your transitions down

This is an essential practice for two reasons:

- If you can't write the transition down, the logic/sequence of the argument isn't there yet. Thinking it all fits together isn't enough – you won't know for sure until you write the transition.
- You must remember to deliver them. For the audience to benefit from the transition, they must hear it. But if you haven't written it down, it's quite likely that you won't deliver it.

And all the right content, in the right sequence, will still make no sense at all if the transitions aren't delivered.

Chapter 11: Anchoring it All in Your Audience

Your presentation opening bears a huge load: It has to secure attention and interest, and it both anchors and sets the context for everything else that's to come.

The Practical Tool: The Problem-Centric Opening

The audience-centric opening is a discussion of the audience's problem which has three components:

Part 1: Name the problem – It's a great discipline to get the problem "on the table" as soon as you can. For example:

"Good morning. Today we're going to be talking about an incredible thorny problem..."

Part 2: Insightfully Unpack the Problem – Identify all the different manifestations and implications of that problem. Tell them how many ways it's hurting them.

Part 3: Wave at the Solution – Give a vision of the future. We're here to solve it, not to stare at it.

The problem-centric opening will significantly support your efforts in three ways:

1. It secures initial engagement. People will lean in when you talk about their problems.
2. It establishes credibility in a way that giving your credentials never can.
3. It drives action, because it helps them see that the problem is more serious than they had realized.

Busy people don't like to leave meetings with a new project on their plate, so you have to take the "do nothing" option off the table. You must make the status quo an unacceptable option.

Chapter 12: Whole-Person Engagement

The most interesting question in presentation design is how to intentionally make your work "sticky" and memorable, even when the subject matter is dry and technical.

Great presenters are multi-dimensional. If I verbalize an idea, support it with a powerful visual on screen, and you see that idea captured and highlighted in a handout, that multi-dimensional idea is for more likely to stick.

The Practical Tool: Five Methods of Visualization

1. Story

Stories are great teaching devices, that they hold interest, and that they create context and meaning for points that would otherwise be purely intellectual. Stories really do grab hold of the brain.

2. Visual Images

A great visual can powerfully complement any point or help an audience visualize your narrative.

3. Artifacts/Physical Experiences

While most presentations focus on the ear and the eye, humans assign particular value to the sense of touch.

4. Antithesis: Harnessing the Power of Contrast

In almost any presentation, you have the opportunity for the antithetical comparison between the audience's problem you are defining and the future solutions you are proposing.

When you are seeking to drive action, there is tremendous power in helping your audience visualize the result of that action. Describe the problem as the audience currently experiences it, often through story, and then describe a vision of the

world as it could be if the solution were embraced and let the audience chew on the contrast.

There's a phrase we use to summarize this idea, which is, **"Don't just tell them you can solve their problem. Give them a vision of the problem solved."**

5. Metaphor and Allegory

A presentation metaphor is simply a specific type of visualization, where your big idea is presented in a different "parallel" form. For example a carved pumpkin with pumpkin "guts" coming out its mouth is a visual representation of information overload.

Allegory works in the same way. Imagine the big idea you want to land in your presentation is that "Overconfidence will be your downfall." Then tell the story of the Soviet hockey team in the 1980 Olympics losing to a bunch of upstart college kids from the U.S. The Soviets were supposed to be unbeatable. End your story by saying, "Guys this is a great story, but why am I telling you this? Because if we think we can just show up and win, we're going to find ourselves crying on the ice like that Soviet hockey team. Overconfidence will be our downfall."

Chapter 13: The Supporting Cast – The Correct Use of Visuals and Handouts

Visuals serve one of two specific purposes:

1. Where the information is too complex to be expressed simply in words alone.

There is some information that is simply too hard to grasp verbally. An organization chart is a perfect example. Spatial relationships will always be better understood as visuals. Hence, bar charts and pie charts are completely acceptable visuals.

2. Where you want to "imprint" a point visually

The image of a homeless person is an example of this. The audience could understand the point verbally, but if I want it to land with more force than that I add a visual.

The Five Rules of Visual Aids

Rule #1: Visuals Must be Visual

The purpose of visual aids is to visually reinforce that point being taught, not to restate the words the audience is already hearing. Hence, visual aids must be

visual! You should be showing images, video, diagrams/charts, pictures of people, places and objects.

Rule #2: The Visual Must Teach

Example: A photo of a Polish cavalry officer shooting his rifle while German tanks attack. "This picture reflects exactly where we are today – what we are doing is dangerously outdated."

Rule #3: One Idea Only

If the goal of a visual is to complement a key teaching point, then by definition the visual should be about one idea only.

Rule #4: Take Them Down

Once your idea has been discussed, take down the visual. Leaving the slide up while you're moving on to another point distracts from the new point being made.

In between ideas, a neutral logo slide should be inserted between your visuals. After the first couple of times, the audience will fully figure out what's going on and they'll turn their focus to the presenter where it should be.

Rule #5: Not Too Many

Do not have too many visuals as they can cause visual fatigue. Since you have only a few big ideas, you probably need only a few supporting visuals.

How Does the Presentation Live on After the Presentation?

You must create a handout with the specific purpose of providing the critical information the audience needs to remember, so they don't get distracted taking notes.

It should contain your key ideas and all the pertinent information that supports those ideas. And to integrate it properly into the presentation, as you present, you need to follow and frequently reference where you are in the handout.

For a typical one-hour presentation, a simple one-page handout will usually suffice. Word is often perfectly adequate to create the handout but InDesign is exceptional. It doesn't need to be flashy; it only needs to contain the important information.

The presenter's highest standard of success is "retellability." You want your story to stick so well that it can be retold.

How to Build a Great Handout

Rule #1: Big Ideas and Critical Data/Illustrations Only

A typical handout should contain only the more important ideas and data. It is essentially a summary of everything that mattered during the presentation. Never do “fill-in-the-blanks” handouts. Why?

- They do not create engagement. Instead the audience is in fact intellectually disengaged while writing.
- Fill-in-the-blanks handouts are intellectually insulting to adults
- It weakens the take-home value of the document

Rule #2: Logical Flow

The handout should follow the flow of the design storyboard. Often it is helpful to include your transitions, especially when these are framed as audience questions.

Rule #3: Visually Appealing

You want a handout that is visually appealing not visually overwhelming. Using color and varying fonts and typefaces will boost visual appeal, as does the use of a few select graphics. And for reasons no one understands laminate it. People think paper is pretty cheap, but if you laminate a handout, people treat it as an important document.

Teaching to the Handout

Teaching to the handout simply means referencing where you are in the handout at all times, and tying your presentation to it.

Remember that the audience is processing everything for the first time, and anchoring them in the handout helps to keep them in the flow of the argument. It is helping them boost their retention and their ability to tell the story.

Teaching to the handout is an important practical skill, with three simple rules:

Rule #1: Explain in Your Opening the Importance of the Handout

In your opening, explain that you will be walking through the handout, and that this will save them from taking notes as well as give them a useful takeaway.

Rule #2: Teach to it diligently.

Reference it often, indicate where you are, and be crystal clear when you are moving between sections.

Rule #3: Draw attention to critical words

Draw attention to the critical words, phrases and ideas that you most want them to remember (and which should therefore be prominent in the handout). Do not be afraid to read these verbatim – this actually rewards your hard work of designing precise language for the handout.