

Top 10 Ways to Improve Your Presentations



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t NACHC, we want our audience engaged in our training events, and this requires our presenters to do things differently. Here's what we don't want—a lecture format where learners do nothing but listen or read slides overpacked with text, with very little interaction. So, in the spirit of brevity, this guide provides you with a top 10 list of ways you can improve your presentations—and meet, by the way, NACHC's requirements for adult learning.

Unburden Your Slides of Text



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Here's our first learning fact—it's almost impossible for learners to read a bunch of text on a slide and simultaneously attend to what is being said. Attention is split, and information is simply processed badly. So transform your gargantuan paragraphs into telegraphic bullet points that reinforce what you say.

Simply put, too much complexity is numbing. Your job is to simplify.

How to Do It

1 If you have a paragraph of text, attempt to encapsulate its meaning in a sentence. Then attempt to isolate the main point as concisely as possible—in a simple subject-verb structure, for example.

2 Limit the ideas or facts you want to present on a single slide. Remember, you want your audience to listen to you, not read slides. At best, the text on the slide should introduce the topic.

3 Do not rely on a string of wordy bullet points—the more concise and restrained you are, the more your audience has an opportunity to remember what was said. (This is related to the conversation below on chunking).

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Provide illustrations



Studies have proven that simplified diagrams are more effective than complex and realistic illustrations for learning concepts and processes. This obviously relates to our last point. Certainly, for advanced learners, you want to add that complexity—after all, a surgeon won't perform open heart surgery on a schematic diagram—but for transmitting new concepts, err on the side of simplicity.

How to Do It

1 Simplify your graphics. You want to illustrate a specific point, not cover in depth a complicated and multi-tiered process. Adjust the graphic to the audience's level of expertise

2 Avoid using actual documents in all their complexity. For example, an actual financial income statement would like intimidate a beginner, so create a simplified illustration that makes your point without all the detail.

3 Use illustrations that have functions beyond decoration for maximum impact. Studies have shown that presentations filled with only decorative graphics actually depress learning.



Use Plenty of Examples



You want examples in your presentation—particularly since your goal is to transfer your presentation's ideas into the workplace. You want concrete examples of how concepts are actually applied or processes actually occur in the environment.

One of the most effective tools you have is a “worked example,” which is essentially a step-by-step breakdown of how to solve a problem. If you then give learners a similar problem to solve (and maybe get them started), then the audience becomes actively engaged. Rather than telling learners what to do, you are modeling best practices, then giving them an opportunity to practice.

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How to Do It

1 Isolate a problem that illustrates a concept or principle you have introduced. Start with a general scenario and tackle the problem step by step. You can ask learners how they would act at each stage, then reinforce best practices. Note that the emphasis is on application, not merely using a picturesque example.



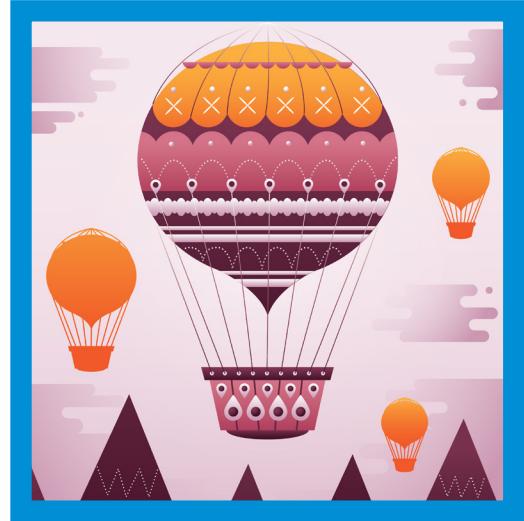
2 Imagine how you could use a “worked example” in your presentation. What does a best practice look like? Can you guide learners through how to solve a problem? Add such examples particularly when a process is complex or counter-intuitive.



3 Can you profitably add an analytical exercise to your presentation? Is there a mini-scenario you can present? A difficult decision? What are the real difficulties, the things you’re audience usually gets wrong?



Tell a Story



If you start with some easy examples, you can build toward more complex scenarios. A presentation is essentially a story—it's a journey for the learner from darkness to light, from ignorance to understanding, from chaos to order (or whatever archetype best suits your temperament).

But you do want your presentation to move toward a goal. That's why learning objectives are so crucial—if you don't know what you want your learners to do at the end of the session, you lack a compelling story.

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How to Do It

1 Structure your narrative around the behavior you want to change. If you're presenting on non-coercive leadership practices, you want to move from easy applications to harder scenarios. You want to emphasize obstacles to realizing the goal—this is a variation of the hero's journey.

2 Put the learner squarely into the narrative. Emphasize “you” as a form of address, as in “imagine you are in situation x.” This will personalize the experience.

3 Focus on transitions. How does each part of a presentation relate to other parts? If you can't clearly articulate how A section relates to B section, then you need to restructure your talk. If you can articulate this, then do it. You should emphasize the stage in the overall process (or “narrative”). Just like paragraphs have solid transitions, so should slides.

Embrace “Less is More”



If you have sixty slides in your slide deck full of complex text, maybe drenched in legal jargon or technical specs, you can't hope to achieve anything but limping through 10 slides in the vain hope of providing an “overview.”

That type of presentation is like a tsunami. Your learners can't take in that much information. They are more likely to be dazed and overwhelmed. Instead, you need to focus. If you actually integrate examples and scenarios into your presentation, then you will be able to cover even less ground. What are your essential points? What can you reasonably expect your learners to take away and maybe implement in their workplace?

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How to Do It

1 Limit the number of topics you include in a session to what you can adequately explore. You need to limit the number of topics, limit the number of slides for your topics, and the number of bullet points on each slide. Your presentation at all levels should be pruned.

2 Assume that your learners are not starting from scratch. You need to base what you focus on in light of what your audience already knows. So do not try to be comprehensive in the manner of a textbook. You will quickly lose your audience members amidst a flood of information that, based on brain science, they have no chance of recalling.

3 The less you are at center stage, the more engaged your audience becomes. Allow time for discussion and feedback. Don't simply rush back to the points you desperately want to make.

Chunk Your Content



The idea of chunking comes from information processing—if you need to recall a long number, then you should break that number down into smaller “chunks.” I won’t trace the evolution of that idea from numerical strings to instructional design, but the idea is fairly self-evident—to learn we need to construct patterns, to “chunk” information in order to retain it. Your job is to facilitate that process—you limit the amount of information presented at one time, then allow learners to grasp patterns. A tsunami of information, without sufficient time allowed to order and assimilate it, now becomes a manageable sequence. Building blocks, really.

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How to Do It

1 Determine a clear learning objective. What do you want your learners to do when they get back to the office?

2 Organize your content into 10 minutes segments, with each segment allowing for illustration and some form of practice. There should be an objective for each segment, and there should be some form of verifying how much has been grasped.

3 Solidify what learners already know in relation to the learning objective, then what new information and training they need to accomplish the objective. Note what examples and practice activities should be included for the best results.

4 Keep an “eye on the clock.” If you already have presentation materials and activities for an hour, and you’ve only got through 15% of your material, you need to scale back your presentation’s scope.

Focus on Pain Points



Let's assume that you are ready to narrow the scope of your presentation. But how do you determine what to include and what to toss? Imagine a complex process, with many steps, which is so involved it would take you hours and hours to go through it all. You can't cram all that information into a slide deck (despite your 60 bloated slides with too much information). One of the best ways is to focus on pain points. Where are the points of failure? And what parts of the process generally pose no problems? If you focus on pain points, you can naturally construct learning scenarios or problems to solve. Why waste your time rehearsing things that people already know or do well?

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How to Do It

1 Understand your audience and their general behavior: What are the tasks that are generally a problem, and what are generally performed without a hitch? What bad practices lead to drastic results?

2 Create simulations and scenarios for problem-based learning. In questions and simulations, deliberately target behaviors which are not optimal, yet common.

3 Allow learners to voice their opinions, but be prepared with data and scholarly references to show that their preferred actions are problematic and less effective than other p[ractices.



Change Thought & Behavior



Your goal is to change behavior—or disrupt thought paradigms, if you want to talk fancy. An understanding of what people do wrong will lead naturally into more active learning. Pinpointing exactly what you want learners to do when they get back to work is crucial. If you're merely providing an overview, with no clear behavior change, then it's pretty clear that behavior won't change.

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How to Do It

1 Understand your learners' perceptual framework. What prejudices and misconceptions are the most difficult to change? Remember, if you're not dealing with the sources of bad practices (which sometimes are enmeshed in a world view that must be challenged), you likely will not effect change.

2 Consider having learners assume a perspective foreign than their own and defend it. This works quite well in groups. You should model this behavior in your presentations by assuming the role of the "devil's advocate," which gives learners permission to explore new ways of thinking.

3 When learners offer their own viewpoint, be ready to challenge their claims--even if they are correct. You want to cultivate the ability to analyze one's position, with the goal of exercising their judgment in novel situations.

4 Be prepared to show concrete examples of both effective and non-effective action. To establish credibility, you can't remain on a theoretical level . However,, the more you can get other learners' to share best practices, the better, as learners often place more value on their colleague's pragmatic advice.

Ask Strategic Questions



Raising questions as an instructional method goes back to Socrates. It's a time-honored technique for honing the analytical skills of students, but one that is underutilized in presentations. That's a real missed opportunity.

As a mentor—not a lecturer—you want to shape perception and instill best practices without being didactic. You want learners to offer their own ideas and then provide feedback. You ask questions to test knowledge, debunk preconceptions or myths, or provide challenges. You can ask your audience to put concepts into their own words (a “self-explanation”) which research has shown to be crucial to constructing knowledge.

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How to Do It

1 Use polling based on your underlying purpose, in ways similar to the above discussion. What do you want to do? At the opening of a presentation, you should use questions to test their knowledge. This will help you determine what to emphasize in your presentation.

2 Use questions to debunk preconceptions or myths about best practices (as we discussed in #4). Also use questions that challenge learners to explain difficult material in their own words. This is actually proven to be one of the most effective ways learners can process information.

3 Use questions are “pulse-taking” of your audience. This is particularly effective when framing an active learning event--”how many of you do X” can help you frame a discussion. Using polling technology is not only engaging, but can provide a record of responses that you can use to improve your presentation.

4 Vary your question types. You don’t always need a full-blown simulation, and you certainly don’t always want to ask “pulse-taking” polling questions. Mix it up! You should always follow up questions with feedback. You want to clarify the significance of how learners respond.

Ask Offer Real Opportunities for Engagement



Your audience has a wealth of experience that you can leverage for learning. You don't have to be the font of wisdom. Your presentation should be built around opportunities for interaction—you shouldn't just drop a few polls like gumdrops on the surface of your talk.

Allow learners to exercise their judgment and suggest best practices. Let them talk about benefit and risk, failure and success, in ways that contribute to your learning objectives. The trick is to be prepared to offer constructive feedback—you can powerfully reshape behavior through a mentoring approach than as the Voice of Authority.

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How to Do It

1 Allow learners to explore options or make choices to see how close they come to best practices, then offer feedback as to what empirically is the best practice. This is also to critique their choices, either directly or by opening up another set of responses from audience. (e.g., what do you find potentially problematic about this solution?)

2 Use participant responses to frame your discussion. For example, you ask audience to identify and share the top 3 issues they are facing with regards to X or Y. You can ask them to contribute to a SWOT analysis, for example, with one “seed” idea in each quadrant on the slide deck.

3 When you discuss a concept, challenge participants to provide a real-life example (with or without solutions, depending on your purpose). You may want to use a participant’s example for the group to explore.

4 Ask participants to discuss how a proposed solution/ best practice will benefit them in their own environment. Obviously, this should be positioned after you’ve offered best practices.

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