GET TO THE POINT

Simplify, Sharpen, and Sell Your Message

Joel Schwartzberg

SECOND EDITION

Get to the Point!

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Second Edition

JOEL SCHWARTZBERG

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To the hundreds of clients who came to me
with soft ideas and left with sharp points.

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Foreword

Writing the foreword for a book called *Get to the Point!* is challenging because the more I write here, the longer it takes you to get to the communication solutions you're looking for. If I go on too long, you'll either skim the foreword or skip it entirely to get to the good stuff. So, in keeping with the book's core premise, I'll get straight to the point:

> *If your goal is to have and deliver a clear point, this book is an invaluable guide.*

Now that I've made my point clear, please allow me a few more paragraphs to explain why I recommend this book more than any other.

Get to the Point! was the very first book I bought on the topic of clear and concise communication, coinciding with the start of my own passion for the subject. Over the years, as Joel and I wrote, published, and coached, our digital paths crossed more often, and we became intercontinental friends and collaborators.

We both strongly believe that everyone can develop effective communication skills, and the more resources there are to help people get their message across clearly, the better.

Every day, I encounter people struggling to get their points across at work, at home, and in the media. Quite often, they don't seem to know the points they want to make, producing disorganized streams of words and ideas they can only hope their audiences will understand.

Joel's book is the cure for anyone suffering from this lack of clarity and impact.

Packed with new insights, research, and recommendations (and a relatively brief foreword), this new edition is still short, simple, and immensely practical. As Joel likes to say, if you can't get to the point in a book about getting to the point, you're like "a dentist with bad teeth."

The first time I read *Get to the Point!*, I stopped halfway through. Moments later, with the book and my laptop open in front of me, I set about updating every presentation I was scheduled to deliver in the following three weeks. In a surprisingly short time, I had made those presentations significantly more compelling and sharpened the clarity of my thoughts on each one.

Since then, I've championed Joel's ideas and methods enthusiastically with clients, colleagues, and friends, helping people get to the point as early as the first minute.

There is so much more I could say in praise of *Get to the Point!*, but as I said at the start, the more I write here, the longer it takes for you to get to the good stuff. So, I'll let Joel take it from here.

CHRIS FENNING
Author of *The First Minute: How to Start Conversations That Get Results*

Introduction

The First Step

If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.

—Albert Einstein

When I was in sixth grade, I gave one of my first formal speeches. Wearing a blue polyester three-piece suit and wide clip-on tie, I competed at a local speech tournament with an "original oratory" about the neutron bomb.

(I know, fun stuff for a twelve-year-old, but these were the Reagan years.)

Guided only by that two-word topic, I researched and regurgitated all the facts Funk & Wagnalls and the local library could provide me about a radioactive warhead built to maximize human destruction and minimize property destruction.

I comprehensively described the bomb, how it worked, and who developed it. But, looking back, my speech had no point. I delivered content, but no contentions, such as:

- Why is the neutron bomb an important topic to explore?
- What did we learn from developing the bomb, militarily, politically, or culturally?
- Should we have discontinued the neutron bomb or proceeded with it?
- What does the development of such a bomb say about our values?

I had essentially written a product description, a book report, a Wikipedia page.

I think about that speech often—not only because those were my first steps into an activity I would pursue doggedly for eleven years, but because it represents the most devastating mistake people make in public communication: *not knowing their point*.

This error is made by salespeople who describe their inventory but don't say, "This product will make you more successful," activists who detail their initiatives but don't say, "This campaign will save lives," designers who display beautiful images but don't say, "This branding will inspire customer loyalty," and business leaders who share their project plans but don't say, "This endeavor will revolutionize our industry."

Those are points—everything else is topics, themes, titles, and thoughts.

I ended my competitive public speaking career with a national championship in 1990, coached several college forensics teams, worked as a speechwriter for ten years and a presentation coach for nearly twenty—and by far, the most important thing I learned during that time was this:

> *No matter who you are, how you're communicating, what you're saying, or who you're communicating to, you need a point to create impact. Without a point, everything you say is pointless.*

As you read this, you may be imagining a public speaker in front of a large audience. But the truth is, you can make a point every time you communicate. Whether you're giving a keynote speech or a Zoom pitch, talking to your manager or your mother-in-law, composing an email or creating a PowerPoint presentation, having a real point is critical to making your audience not just listen but *feel*, *think*, and *act*.

Congratulations on taking this step toward championing your ideas and making your words matter. I'd say "good luck," but public speaking is a skill, not a talent, which means communication success is in your hands, not in the stars.

1

The Big Flaw

I believe that unarmed truth and
unconditional love will have the final word.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

For nearly two decades, I've witnessed the lack of a point contribute directly to nervousness, rambling, and communication failure by everyone from students to CEOs.

But the peril doesn't end there.

Communication failure leads to tangible problems, including customer churn, job loss, revenue loss, and reductions in individual credibility and trust.

Don't take it from me. A 2023 study by Grammarly and The Harris Poll found that poor workplace communication costs US businesses up to $1.2 trillion annually due to reduced productivity, brand degradation, employee retention issues, and lost business opportunities.

Making it personal, a 2023 Stanford University study found that only about 25 percent of employees feel their leader's communications align with their expectations and needs.

Most pointless speakers *think* they have a point, but what they actually have are far less powerful topics, themes, titles, observations, descriptions, and catchphrases.

You often see topics and observations being confused for points during wedding toasts, when the best man thinks his point is "My friend Jack is a helluva guy." Twenty minutes later, the toast is a rambling mess in search of a point—and not just because Jack's best man is drunk.

Knowing you need a point to have impact is one thing. Knowing how to recognize and create a meaningful point is another.

2

Know Your Point

I believe that people make their own luck by great preparation and good strategy.

—Jack Canfield

The idea of presenting points is not new. We've all heard or said some version of these phrases:

"Get to the point!"

"What's your point?"

"Please stick to your point."

"My point is this . . ."

You may even have encountered point training before, perhaps without realizing it. In high school and college, a point is called a "thesis." In media relations, it's a "key message." In business, it's an "elevator pitch." Sometimes, a point is called "the big idea." My wife's fourth-grade language arts class calls it a "So what?"

So what is a point? Let's dig in.

Imagine a student who's written a history paper on the American Revolution. If you ask them for the point of their paper, they might say it's the American Revolution.

That's a topic.

They might say it's George Washington and the founding of America.

That's a title.

They might say it's the role of perseverance in American history.

That's a theme.

A *point* is unique.

A point is a *contention* you can propose, illustrate, prove, and defend.

A point makes its process and purpose instantly clear.

A point tells you *what happens*, *how it happens*, and—most importantly—*why it matters*.

These are examples of points:

- **A politician's point:** My tax reform plan will expand home-buying opportunities for the middle class.
- **An executive's point:** This investment in R&D will ensure our company stays profitable well into the future.
- **A consultant's point:** Our audit will uncover ways to make your company's workflow more efficient.
- **An advocate's point:** Your support and contributions to this movement will save lives.
- **A job interviewee's point:** My skills and experience will help your department succeed.

To help you develop and refine your own points, I've developed a simple three-step test:

Step 1: The "I Believe That" test

Step 2: The XY test

Step 3: The Truism-Buster test

Step 1: The "I Believe That" Test

The "I Believe That" test is a simple pass/fail exercise: Can you fit your point into the phrase below *to form a complete sentence*?

"I believe that _____."

If your assertion forms a complete sentence, you are on your way to making a strong point. If you only have a sentence fragment, you need to reimagine your phrase so that it forms a complete sentence.

Remember the history paper example from earlier in this chapter? The "I Believe That" test reveals those point failures. The phrases "I believe that the American Revolution," "I believe that George Washington and the founding of America," and "I believe that the role of perseverance in American history" are fragments, not complete sentences (your fourth-grade English teacher would not be impressed).

But "I believe the American Revolution formalized our distinct democratic identity" is a complete sentence and thus a point.

Here are more examples of non-point sentence fragments and real-point complete sentences:

- **Fragment:** "I believe that innovations in IT."

  Point: "I believe that innovations in IT will make us more efficient."

- **Fragment:** "I believe that income inequality."

  Point: "I believe that income inequality is America's biggest domestic challenge."

- **Fragment:** "I believe that investing in infrastructure."

  Point: "I believe that investing in infrastructure is the best way to prepare for our future."

Once your point passes the "I Believe That" test, go to step 2. If it doesn't pass, keep revising it until your "I believe that" statement is grammatically sound as a complete sentence. If you need more inspirational examples of "I believe" statements, you will find them separating the chapters of this book.

Quick note: I'm not suggesting you always use the words "I believe that" in your point—this is merely a way to test that you have a point. But using those words has the advantage of attaching your reputation and credibility to your proposal, which can be very compelling, especially if you qualify as a subject matter expert.

This character credibility is what Aristotle called "ethos" in his three-part principle of rhetorical appeals that create effective persuasion (logos, pathos, and ethos). Using the phrase "I believe that" amplifies your ethos—which I know wasn't on your to-do list this morning.

Step 2: The XY Test

The XY test is a simple equation template to ensure your point has two crucial elements: a valuable impact, and a means to achieve that impact.

Here's the template:

"If we do X, Y will result."

X = Means (*what* we do)

Y = Impact (*why* we do it)

(You can use variations, like "X has led to Y" and "Y was achieved by X.")

For example, let's say you're proposing a celebrity-hosted podcast to expose your brand to more podcast-loving millennial consumers.

Having only an X looks like this:

> "We should create a celebrity-hosted podcast." (Begging the question, "Why?")

Having only a Y looks like this:

> "We should reach out to millennial consumers." (Begging the question, "How?")

Having both the X and the Y looks like this:

> "A celebrity-hosted podcast (X) will expose our brand to a millennial audience (Y)."

Enhancing Your X and Y

> Not all Xs and Ys are created equal. The most intriguing Xs are specific, not generic, like:
>
> "Create a podcast" versus "Explore new content channels"
>
> "Store our files in the cloud" versus "Manage our files more efficiently"
>
> "Launch a public awareness initiative" versus "Develop a campaign"

Meanwhile, the most powerful Ys reflect not just any desired result, but the *most important impact* (from your audience's perspective).

For example, if you're in the business of rescuing people from natural disasters, your Y will be "saving lives." Yet, all too often, I see presentations about lifesaving work in which the speaker's point ends with smaller or shorter-range milestones like website traffic, fundraising, social media followers, or cost savings.

These smaller impacts may resonate with select audiences, but to general audiences—internal or external—your most ambitious impact will be the most captivating Y, whether it's rescuing disaster victims, attracting a major client, or selling more Coca-Cola.

The key to enhancing your Y is asking of each one, "Why is *that* impact important?" until you arrive at the most valuable Y for your audience. Here are for-profit and nonprofit examples of elevating the Y:

For-profit:
Buying this Super Bowl ad will increase traffic to our sneaker website.

Why is that important?

Because it will bring more eyeballs to our new sneaker brand.

And why is that important?

Because that increased exposure will entice more people to buy our newest sneakers.

Final point: *Buying this Super Bowl ad will entice more people to buy our sneakers.*

Nonprofit:
Our social media influencer campaign will increase the number of influencers promoting our mission to end hunger.

Why is that important?

Because it will expand public awareness of our mission to end hunger.

And why is that important?

Because it will inspire public contributions and action to end hunger.

Final point: *Our social media influencer campaign will inspire public contributions and action to end hunger.*

A message that includes both a meaningful impact and a specific method to achieve gives your audience everything they need to think, "Tell me more!"

Step 3: The Truism Buster Test

The Truism Buster test red-flags pointless truisms, which the Cambridge Dictionary defines as "a statement so obvious or said so often that its truth is not questioned." You should avoid truisms because communicating something immediately obvious to your audience has no value to them or you.

Truisms may exist because the statements are inarguably factual ("Brushing your teeth keeps them healthy," "The

moon affects ocean tides") or because they're so broad that they can't be counter-argued ("Some things never change," "Politics is complicated").

If you're unsure whether your point is a truism, here's the test. Answering "Yes" to either of these questions means it is *not* a truism:

1. Could someone raise a reasonable counterpoint?
2. Do I need to prove this contention?

Let's apply this to the point "Generative AI will help us produce marketing emails more efficiently":

1. Could someone raise a reasonable counterpoint?

   Yes. Some may argue that editing AI-produced emails will be time-consuming.

2. Do I need to prove this contention?

   Yes. I'd need to see data on email production time with and without AI assistance.

Putting It All Together

Let's see how these three steps might be applied to develop and refine a proposed point regarding a fictional social media site called Beehive:

- "Beehive's new privacy features" = Not a point
  (Flunks the "I Believe That" test.)
- "Beehive has privacy features." = Not a point
  (Passes the "I Believe That" test but flunks the XY test.)

- ► "Beehive's new privacy features substantially protect users from identity theft and marketing exploitation." = A point!

  (Passes the "I Believe That" test, the XY test, and the Truism Buster test because it's a complete sentence, has both a means and a meaningful impact, and requires evidence to be trusted.)

Almost every professional—and personal—communication can be improved if expressed as a point. A student once challenged me on this assertion by suggesting that someone who introduces speakers or simply opens and closes a conference doesn't have a point.

Indeed, "Introducing Samantha Speaker" isn't a point.

But "Samantha Speaker's ideas will help us become more effective project managers" is.

"Welcome to the conference!" isn't a point.

But "This conference will give you valuable ideas to make your staff recruiting and retention efforts more successful" is.

"Good night, and thanks for coming!" isn't a point.

But "My hope is that you'll use and share the insights you learned during these two days to cut unnecessary costs in your business" is.

Don't just make words. Make your words matter.

3

Sharpen Your Point

I believe that good journalism, good television, can make our world a better place.

—Christiane Amanpour

By this time, you have an authentic and usable point—imagine it as the tip of a #2 pencil. But ask yourself this: Is it the *sharpest* point possible? Sharp enough to penetrate my audience?

Four specific tactics (all safe for your fingers) can help you sharpen that point so that it comes out like a laser beam, not a firehose.

Remove Badjectives

Almost every type of writing is improved when you strip out generic adjectives that only add dead weight to your point. I call these too-broad adjectives "badjectives."

Compare the examples in these two columns:

Column 1	Column 2
Important	Urgent
Great	Profitable
Wonderful	Efficient
Amazing	Unprecedented
Very Good	Galvanizing

The adjectives on the left are nearly pointless compared to the ones on the right, which convey a specific state. When we say something is "great" or "very good," there's little indication of scale, reason, or specific meaning. Yet, speeches and written reports are often filled with those words, probably because they come to mind so easily.

If you're using badjectives, or suspect you are, here's the best way to exterminate them:

1. Say your point aloud.
2. Ask, "Why?"
3. Replace your badjective with your answer.

Here are a few examples:

- **Example 1:** I believe hiring a social media manager is important.

  Why?

  Because a social media manager can work with influencers to build positive buzz around our product.

  Replace the badjective "important" with the specific answer.

  Final point: I believe a social media manager can build positive buzz about our product.

- **Example 2:** Our new marketing strategy is weak.

  Why?

  Because it focuses too much on product benefits and not enough on our customers' needs.

  Replace the badjective "weak" with the specific answer.

  Final point: I believe our marketing strategy focuses too much on product benefits and not enough on our customers' needs.

Using badjectives is like a Little League coach saying, "Come on now, Jamie!" versus "Keep your eye on the ball as it comes to you, Jamie!" One has spirit but no value, while the other makes a substantive point.

Remember: You don't merely want to be your point's cheerleader; you want to be your point's champion and activator.

Cut Useless Words

I use one word more pointlessly than any other: "just." It resides in my writer's brain and emerges whenever I'm inclined to qualify or minimize an idea. More often than not, the usage is redundant or otherwise unnecessary.

In my final proofread of this book, I looked up all the times I used "just": thirty-eight! That's significantly more than "only" (twenty-five), "merely" (thirteen), and "simply" (nine). After my audit, I removed ten "just"s that served no contextual purpose.

Other common pointlessly used words and phrases include "really," "basically," "literally," "actually," "absolutely," "honestly," "like," "clearly," "completely," "seriously," "obviously," "very," "basic," "in my opinion," "as a matter of fact," "to be honest," and "needless to say." Recognize any of those in your own writing and speaking patterns? (The grammarian in me also encourages you to consider cutting the often unnecessary "that/that is" and "which/which is").

This may seem like a minor issue unless you have a strict word limit, but even one word too many is too many words. Having too many words complicates your point and your audience's ability to process it.

My suggestion: Do what I did. Use the "find" function to search for those words and pull out the pointless ones like weeds from a garden. The more you do this, the better you'll get at curbing yourself as you write instead of afterward.

Avoid "Split Ends"

Often, speakers try to sneak two or more points into one statement—a habit I call "split ends." Here's an example:

> I believe moving our files to the cloud will protect our work from loss, improve file organization and version control, increase the security of confidential material, reduce file storage and bandwidth costs, make documents easier to share and collaboratively edit, and reduce our carbon footprint.

Having read that once, look away and try to repeat all those benefits. Can you even identify the benefits most important to the speaker?

Both tasks are difficult, if not impossible, because there are too many ideas fighting for your attention. In most cases of split ends, one idea is the most important, based on your organization's mission and your audience's interests. If your point suffers from split ends, no shampoo will help. The audience is not only forced to split their attention between multiple points, but left clueless about which idea is most relevant. As a result, whatever you gain by squeezing in several ideas, you lose by diluting the impact of each.

Judge for yourself by comparing how easily you digest these two versions of a point:

- **Version 1:** I believe moving our files to the cloud will protect our work from loss, increase the security of confidential material, improve file organization and version control, reduce file storage

and bandwidth costs, and reduce our carbon footprint.

- **Version 2:** I believe moving our files to the cloud will protect our work from theft and loss.

Removing elements from your point doesn't mean banishing them forever from your presentation. You can include other important points through consolidation (as you see with "theft and loss" above) or by separating distinct subpoints ("Now that we understand how cloud filing improves document safety, let's see how it makes the process of creating and sharing files more efficient").

The key is to avoid complicating your main point with multiple elements—other points, excessive adjectives, unnecessary words—that tax your audience's analytic ability and make it harder for them to receive your complete message. Psychologist John Sweller, who has spent decades studying how our brains process and store information, calls this neural traffic jam "cognitive overload."

I often put it to my clients like this: Say many things, and they'll remember none. Say some things, and they'll remember some. Say one thing (or at least, one at a time), and they'll remember *all*.

Prioritize Impacts on People

After several years of enhancing people's points, I spotted an interesting pattern: The most powerful and memorable points typically described impacts on *living things*, not *non-living things*.

Living things include people, families, patients, customers, communities, and animals.

Non-living things include companies, facilities, money, brands, reputations, abilities, and data.

The impact of these points may be greater because humans are more powerfully affected by the experiences of other humans than by non-living things or concepts, no matter how novel, innovative, or chocolate-covered they are.

If you want to transition your point from impacting a non-living thing to impacting a living thing, ask, "Who does that impact help?" and insert the beneficiary. Here are some examples of that transformation:

- **Non-human impact:** This pharmaceutical innovation increases our ability to deliver medication.

  Human impact: This pharmaceutical innovation increases our ability to reduce human suffering and save lives.

- **Non-human impact:** Our clean energy campaign is improving the sustainability of urban cities.

  Human impact: Our clean energy campaign is improving the health and welfare of people in urban cities.

- **Non-human impact:** AI is making the purchasing experience more efficient and personalized.

  Human impact: AI enables customers like Mike and Flora to shop more quickly and successfully.

Not all points require a human impact, but identifying one and explicitly referencing it can make a point instantly more compelling and relatable to your fellow earthlings.

Don't Get Attached to the Words

Last tip: Don't get attached to the words. Some point makers—especially writers and lawyers—write a "perfect point" and try to memorize it. The problem with this approach is if they forget the words, they're stuck because they haven't permitted themselves to improvise.

Synonyms exist for good reason, and your goal as a communicator is to convey your point, not specific words. So, feel free to use a variety of words and phrases to make your point. Most audiences won't remember the words you said, but the point you made—and that's the bigger win.

All Things Considered

Let's combine some of the concepts we've covered in a real-world example.

If you listen to National Public Radio (NPR) regularly, you probably dread the pledge drives—extended periods when the nonprofit organization uses airtime to ask for financial donations. It's annoying and repetitive, but very necessary. Here's how we might evolve a donation request from something relatively unmoving to its most powerful incarnation:

1. You should donate to public radio. *(XY alert! Why should I?)*

2. Donating to public radio is important. *(Badjective alert! Why is it important?)*

3. Donating to public radio supports quality programming. *(Human impact alert! Who does this help?)*

4. Donating to public radio helps us inform and inspire listeners like you. *(Where do I send the check?)*

Elevating "you should donate to public radio" to "donating to public radio helps us inform and inspire listeners like you" evolves the point from a generic plea to an urgent proposal.

A Taylor-Made Speech

People often ask me to recommend a speech I admire. There are plenty to choose from, spanning George Washington to Oprah Winfrey, but one I come back to time and time again is Taylor Swift's 2016 speech accepting her second Album of the Year Grammy Award. (I promise I'm not pandering to Swifties.)

An awards show is not a TED Talk, so anything Taylor said would have been acceptable. She knew it too, but as she closed, she chose to say this:

> *As the first woman to win Album of the Year at the Grammys twice, I want to say to all the young women out there: There are going to be people along the way who will try to undercut your success, or take credit for your accomplishments or your fame. But if you just focus on the work and you don't let those people sidetrack you, someday when you get where you're going,*

you'll look around, and you will know that it was you and the people who love you who put you there, and that will be the greatest feeling in the world. Thank you for this moment.

Let's put that point to the test:

"I Believe That" test? *Check*.

XY test? *Check*.

Truism Buster test? *Check*.

HVP? *Check*.

Impact on people? *Check*.

Connection to her audience? *Check*.

Inspiring that audience? *Check*.

It's worth watching a recording of this speech (Google "Taylor Swift 2016 speech Album of the Year"). Take note of how Taylor kept her gaze on the camera, used pauses to master her speed and her words, and spoke with intensity but not anger. She didn't read or memorize the speech, but she knew the point she wanted to make and delivered it with clarity, efficiency, and impact (you'll see that impact in the faces of her audience if you watch the video).

There's another remarkable example I'd like to share: In January 2025—as I was finalizing this new version of *Get to the Point!*—I saw Demi Moore deliver a similarly moving Golden Globes acceptance speech for her leading role in *The Substance*. Like Taylor's speech, Demi's remarks focused on a fresh and compelling point, made even more powerful through the lens of a personal story:

> *Thirty years ago, I had a producer tell me I was a "popcorn actress" and, at that time, I made that mean that this wasn't something that I was allowed to have—that I could do movies that were successful, that made a lot of money, but that I couldn't be acknowledged, and I bought in and I believed that. That corroded me over time, to the point where I thought maybe this was it. Maybe I was complete. Maybe I'd done what I was supposed to do. But you can know the value of your worth if you just put down the measuring stick.*

Ditching a script or notes, Demi devoted all of her eye contact—and energy—to her audience, enhancing her personal connection with them. (Google "Joel Schwartzberg Demi Moore" to see my full love letter to her speech.)

I share these two moments not just to impress you, but to encourage you. You may never win an award on national television, but you can deliver a presentation as compelling and meaningful as Taylor's and Demi's because you and they have the same four necessary tools: a mind, a mouth, a voice, *and* a point.

4

Make Your Point

I believe that each person is more than the worst thing they've ever done.

—Bryan Stevenson

Knowing and sharpening your point is a critical start, but it's only part of the battle because your point shouldn't live only in your head. Successfully *conveying* your point to an audience requires a clear understanding of what your role is (and isn't).

Know Your Job: Presenting, Not Performing

When asked to list the qualities of a "great presenter," people often say things like:

- Interesting
- Funny
- Knowledgeable
- Entertaining
- Smart
- Impressive
- Charming

Those qualities can indeed support your presentation, but as goals or requirements, they belong more in the realm of performing than presenting. And there's a big difference between the two.

Performing is an act of impressing people with your skill, focusing on their perception of you. (He was amazing!)

Presenting is an act of conveying your idea, focusing on your point. (Her point inspired me!)

One of the "tells" of clients with performance mindsets rather than presentation mindsets is their answer to the question, "What's your goal?" If they respond, "To give a great speech," "To be admired," or "To impress my boss and colleagues," they're focused on all the wrong things.

Another pitfall of a performance mindset is the tendency to compare your performance to other performers. Remember: no one is better qualified to deliver your presentation than you are because *you* conceived it, researched it, wrote it, improved it, and practiced it before presenting it for this occasion.

When you focus on elevating your public speaking abilities—not emulating your public speaking idols—you leverage what makes you and your speech unique and put yourself in the best position to succeed.

People with a performance mindset are also more likely to worry about "What if I screw up and people think worse of me?" than "What if my point isn't clear?"

Actual performers—actors, singers, comics, models, dancers—may reasonably feel more pressure because the spotlight is on them and how talented, funny, attractive, or creative they are. But what is gained when a presenter is remembered but their point is not? Not much, unless they aim only to secure more public speaking gigs.

It helps many presenters to think of themselves as bicycle messengers. You are delivering something valuable from point A to point B. Your measure of success is whether or not the delivery is received, not what the recipient thinks of the colors on your helmet. If you deliver your point, even imperfectly, *you succeed*. If you don't deliver your point, *you fail*, even if you come across as fascinating, hilarious, friendly, smart, attractive, and admirable.

It's no coincidence that we say an actor "performs" a monologue or "portrays" a character, while a presenter "delivers" or "presents" a speech. This language reinforces the difference in objective.

Because presenting is an act of delivery, not performance, the only way to know if you've succeeded is to ask someone in your practice audience, "Was my point of [doing X will lead to Y] clear?" For an even better test, see if they can correctly express the point you just made without your help.

5

Sell Your Point

I believe that we have to shift from shareholder maximization to stakeholder maximization.

—Marc Benioff

When I worked in the editorial department of a popular kids' magazine, the company's president decided to have a sales trainer teach the basics of closing a deal to our entire staff. He wasn't Alec "Coffee Is for Closers" Baldwin in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, but close.

Those of us with editorial jobs thought this was a waste of our time. After all, we thought, sales is the driving focus of our marketing and advertising staff, not the concern of

writers and editors. But looking back, I see the president was right—we were all in the business of selling. Some of us were selling advertising space and sponsorships; others were selling something just as valuable, if not more: ideas. In both roles (and any with responsibilities that hinge on effective communication), successful transactions require *selling* the points, not simply sharing them.

It helps to think of the difference between sharing and selling like the difference between a book's table of contents (TOC) and its back-cover blurb. The TOC describes the book's inventory. The blurb pitches the book's value—the TOC tells; the blurb sells.

In advertising, the selling versus sharing concept is often described in terms of "benefits" versus "features": When you focus on a product's features, you are simply sharing its attributes, but when you focus on the product's benefits, you are more powerfully selling the concept of how those features improve someone's life.

I'm reminded of a former client, Kathy, who sold branded merchandise like hats, brochures, signs, and pins. I asked her to give me her best sales pitch. Kathy laid out all of her products and began to describe each one:

> *See this hat? This hat is fully adjustable and can feature a four-color logo on the front. See this pin? It can feature a two-color logo and has a magnetic backing, so it won't ruin a shirt or jacket. This lawn sign is made from a special material that will resist rain and wind, and I'll give you a 10 percent discount if you buy 50 or more . . .*

She went on like that until she had no more items to describe.

Kathy did a good job of sharing her inventory and the features of each item, but there was one important concept she didn't communicate:

If you use my products and services, you will be more successful.

Those twelve words were her point, but she never said it, much less sold it.

The idea of selling versus sharing your point can dramatically change how you present it. In one of my recent public speaking workshops, I wrote the word SELL on an index card and held it up whenever I felt my students were sharing or describing, but not selling, their ideas.

Whenever they saw the sign, they instantly changed their tone, speed, volume, body language, and vocabulary, and the audience felt a stronger impact. These speakers came in as explainers and sharers and left as salespeople.

Power Phrases

To help my clients do more selling than sharing, I also encourage them to adopt these point-forcing power phrases:

I propose . . .

I recommend . . .

I suggest . . .

For example:

"I'm proposing an idea to make our process more efficient."

"I'm recommending a campaign to make our workplace culture more diverse."

"I'm suggesting a new logo that better conveys our brand message."

These selling phrases force the creation of a true point because you can't say "I propose" without offering a proposal. The same goes for "recommend" and "suggest." Insert them when you communicate with your colleagues, especially at the end of small meetings and performance reviews, to ensure you're selling your idea with conviction, not simply throwing it out there and hoping for the best.

Attention Magnets

"I propose," "I recommend," and "I suggest" are the strongest examples of what I call *attention magnets*—short phrases that instantly spotlight and sell the points that immediately follow. Here are some other examples:

"Here's the thing . . ."

"To be clear . . ."

"Keep this in mind . . ."

"Here's why this matters . . ."

In Michelle Obama's speech for the virtual 2020 Democratic National Convention, she used no fewer than three attention magnets masterfully:

"And let me once again tell you this . . ."

"Let me be as honest and clear as I possibly can . . ."

"If you take one thing from my words tonight, it is this . . ."

Aren't you already on the edge of your seat?

Upgrading Your Words

Specific word upgrades can also strengthen your sell. Here are six pairs of words that may seem interchangeable but shouldn't be viewed that way—one is an accurate representation of effort, the other a misrepresentation or less inspiring conveyance of that effort (which likely won't get flagged by your grammar programs or proofreaders):

- **Enable versus Allow.** If your effort produced a result, you actively enabled it. If you just removed an obstacle, you merely allowed the result to happen.

  Example: "Innovations in customer service enabled (not "allowed") the store to sell more customized products."

- **Prevent versus Avoid.** If your action stopped something disastrous from happening, you prevented it. If you just moved something out of peril's way (perhaps temporarily), you merely avoided it.

Example: "We must prevent (not "avoid") a housing crisis for people and families."

- **Act versus Address.** If you took deliberate measures to affect an issue, you acted on it. If you just considered the situation, you merely addressed it.

  Example: "We acted on (not "addressed") the severe impact of poverty on these communities."

- **Respond versus React.** If a situation spurred you to action, you responded. If the issue just triggered an emotion, you merely reacted.

  Example: "We responded (not "reacted") immediately to the power outage."

- **Overcome versus Face.** If you successfully conquered an obstacle, you overcame it. If you just encountered the obstacle or stood your ground, you merely faced it.

  Example: "We overcame (not "faced") the systemic challenges."

- **Accomplish versus Meet.** If you accomplished a goal, you achieved it as a direct result of your effort. If you just met the goal, you merely arrived at the milestone by some means.

  Example: "I'm thrilled we accomplished (not "met") our most ambitious goals for the year."

6

Tailor Your Point

I believe that television is the only medium that can truly reach society's lowest common denominator.

—Garry Marshall

Presenting points requires a minimum party of two—one delivering the point and the other receiving it. To maximize that transaction, presenters should customize their points to each audience and their unique interests.

Know Your Audience

Some communication pros boil this directive down to "know your audience," and that advice holds a lot of water. You might need to know:

- Are they new to the topic or subject matter experts?
- Have they been affected by a recent event (a natural disaster or something else in the news)?
- Are they predisposed to appreciate or disapprove of your point?
- Are they fluent in your language?

You also need to know what your audience wants and needs, and the difference between the two.

A *want* is a desire for additional information about something they already know about. Examples include:

- Further details about an upcoming structural reorganization
- Current data about the productivity of staff who work from home
- Human resources tips promised in the event brochure

A *need* is something they ought to know about but are likely unaware of, such as:

- The corporate strategy driving the upcoming structural reorganization

- New data showing more large employers are asking workers to come back to the office
- Why HR has been renamed the "People Team"

Executives, in particular, should remember that just because a point is important to them and something they "want to say" doesn't automatically make it relevant to the audience. To avoid coming across as out of touch, they should audit their ideas for relevancy. This can be as simple as asking, "How will my team benefit from this communication?"

Finally, keep in mind the difference between "need to know" and "*neat* to know." Both types of information may be acceptable in longer-form communications, but "neat to know" items entertain more than they enlighten and should be deprioritized when it comes time to cut.

Stay in Solution Mode

Whatever business you're in, your audience is more interested in solutions than problems—especially if you're a leader. But when the topic is a serious threat, like a disease outbreak, a natural disaster, or some other catastrophic event, presenters often overemphasize the problem and bury the solution in a way that diminishes their message's purpose, leaving the audience overwhelmed and disengaged.

If this is you, look for ways to flip stark messages of peril into hopeful messages of overcoming that peril. Examples

of turning "how this is bad" into "how we're making this bad thing better" include:

- Replace "The carbonated beverage marketplace is saturated with soda brands" with "Here's how our brand stands out in a crowded beverage marketplace."
- Replace "Government funding for cancer research is at an all-time low" with "We're supplementing historically low government funding with other sources of financial support."
- Replace "Climate change will eventually destroy the planet" with "Our climate change awareness campaign can help save the planet."

Note how Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech at the 1963 March on Washington focused primarily not on the pervasive prejudice and discrimination faced by Black Americans, but on his hope and encouragement for equal opportunity. Similarly, President John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address didn't stop with the admonishment, "Ask not what your country can do for you," but forcefully encouraged civil service and responsibility: "Ask what you can do for your country."

Each spoke predominantly—and memorably—of hope, correction, and solution.

Use "Hope" as a Noun, Not a Verb

"Hope" is a powerfully evocative and useful word when you're proposing a solution or goal. But to leverage it most effectively, use it as a noun, not a verb. As a noun, "hope" has baked-in optimism ("This milestone gives me hope"), whereas "hope" as a verb is merely a desire with limited faith in the outcome ("I hope this situation improves").

It's the difference between pointing the way (projecting leadership, confidence, and vision) and crossing your fingers (conveying fear and admitting that the situation is beyond your control).

7

Stay on Point

I believe that our national security lies not just in protecting our borders, but in bridging divides.

—Joe Lieberman

One of the side benefits of having a point is that you can always call on it to facilitate a course correction if you ramble, lose focus, go down a rabbit hole, or otherwise stray from your point.

First, understand that there's no limit to how many times you can bring up your point or use it to get back on track. Your point can't be overstated or repeated too often. No one ever says after a presentation, "Great speech, but the speaker made their point too many times." That's like complaining about getting too much good advice.

Getting Back on the Road

If you suddenly find yourself way off point, you can immediately get back to your point using quick transitions like these:

> "We've veered off the road a bit, but my point is this . . ."
>
> "We're covered a lot today, but here's the thing . . ."
>
> "That's a lot of ideas, but if there's one suggestion I want you to remember, it's . . ."

I tend to use "The bottom line is . . ." as a safety net to ensure my biggest point comes across loud and clear.

Their Point versus Your Point

You may find yourself in a setting where you're pressured to depart from your point to address someone else's point. This can happen when you're a conference panelist, a talk show guest, or simply the unfortunate person arguing with a loudmouth dinner guest.

It can be tempting to take the bait—especially if you have an ironclad defense against their point—but the more time you spend addressing other people's points, the less time you spend conveying your own.

In most conference or interview settings, you're not expected to be a walking encyclopedia—just the most qualified champion of your point. When a booking producer or conference organizer invites you to speak, there should be an understanding that this is a forum to express your

points, not to be put on the spot, attacked, or forced to address points outside your expertise. If you sense other expectations or agendas, pass on the event.

If someone is determined to move you off your point to debate their own, consider using one of these transitional lines (sometimes called *bridges*) to stand your ground and stay on point:

"I hear what you're saying, but my point is . . ."

"I know that's a widespread perception, but the truth is . . ."

"This is indeed a gray area, but I believe that . . ."

"That's untrue. But here's what is true . . ."

"I can't speak to that, but what I can say is . . ."

8

Strengthen Your Point

I believe that good things
come to those who work.
—Wilt Chamberlain

You've now learned how to identify, make, sharpen, and stick to your point, and you realize the imperative of selling it versus sharing it. That knowledge alone puts you ahead of your competitors and colleagues in your ability to present effectively.

Now it's time for extra credit: *strengthening* your point through nonverbal and minimally verbal presentational techniques, starting with something I call "power periods."

Use Power Periods

Many people—people you know, people you report to, even people you admire—make statements that sound like questions, with a high pitch at the end. This is often called "uptalk." Try listening for it by saying these two sentences aloud, precisely as punctuated:

"Our customer base has tripled in size?"

"Our customer base has tripled in size."

Some people have a natural ability to end their statements with periods; others can't help but uptalk everything.

Whether you're a natural uptalker or not, the habit can hinder the conveyance of your point. When you ask a question—even if it only *sounds* like a question—you're indicating, "I'm not sure." But when you end with a period, you're saying, "This I believe."

To test the impact of ending firmly versus questioningly, I sometimes have my students and clients listen to me count aloud from one to five in two different ways. Afterward, I ask the group which way conveyed the most confidence and authority.

The first version, to their ears, sounds like this:

1?

2?

3?

4?

5?

The second version sounds like this:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Of the thousands of clients who've taken this admittedly unscientific test, an overwhelming majority have felt the latter sounded more confident and authoritative. The mere *sound* of a question dramatically reduced the perceived strength behind the expression.

The first step in shifting from uptalk to what I call "power periods" is training your ear to recognize the unrequired question mark. Listen to bosses and colleagues. Listen to news anchors and television hosts. If you can stand it, listen to politicians. Train your ear to listen for uptalk in others, then try to catch yourself doing it.

Eventually, with practice, you'll gain enough muscle memory to prevent uptalk before it happens and insert a power period instead.

The goal isn't having *all* of your sentences end with power periods. Like the occasional filler word, vocal variety can make us sound more human and authentic. But guess what

part of your presentation benefits most from the "this I believe" message of a power period?

That's right—your point.

Three of the best power period users I've ever seen are former presidents Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama. Imagine each of them saying these lines:

"We cannot turn our back on the middle class."

"These laws will strengthen our economy."

"The state of our union is strong."

I don't think it's a coincidence that these three were some of our most admired public speakers; they instinctively know how to convey "this I believe."

Remove Obstacles Between You and Them

It's inarguable that intimate conversations are more compelling than distant ones. This usually means you should get as close to your audience as possible. Clinton used this tactic during town hall debates, physically approaching the individuals he was engaging with.

Communicators can also benefit from this intimacy by removing obstacles—including lecterns, tables, clipboards, laptops, and tablets—between them and their audience. This is why TED speakers and experienced Toastmasters typically avoid standing behind podiums and tables.

I also recommend keeping your hands free rather than fiddling with pens, pointers, and clickers. Truth be told, most presenters who hold things in their hands do so—knowingly or unknowingly—to transfer their nervous energy onto those objects. Very often, that nervousness shows.

When I stand to speak, I remove everything in my hands and pockets, move podiums and tables aside, and stand in front of the projector so my entire body is in view. All of these measures help clear the path for my point.

Turn Up the Volume

One easy act reaps tremendous benefits for anyone trying to convey a point: raising your volume. Being louder—which a six-year-old can accomplish quite capably—corrects several public speaking flaws, including:

- Mumbling
- Speaking too quickly (because speaking both quickly and loudly takes an enormous amount of breath)
- Uptalk (because it feels and sounds awkward to ask a question in a loud voice)
- Talking too quietly

I frequently do an exercise where I ask a few clients to state their names, roles, and points at a volume they would consider "too loud." No shouting or yelling, I say. Just speak at a volume you would never use in a professional setting. This is a safe space.

After each client performs the exercise—or tries to—I ask the group two questions:

1. Would you consider the speaker "too loud" if you heard them speaking at that volume during a meeting?
2. Did your perception of the speaker change due to the new loudness?

The answer to question 1 is almost always a hard "no." Most speakers can't bring themselves to speak too loudly, even if I implore them. At best, they're a little louder than usual, and often only for the first few words.

Few speakers can speak inappropriately loudly and keep it up. By the fifth or sixth word, they're generally either at a perfect volume or still too soft. Because of that, the first big takeaway is this: There's no such thing as being too loud. Even if there were, our internal self-control systems would never allow it.

The answer to question 2 is where things get interesting. When I ask the group how their impression of the speaker changed as a result of the volume increase, they almost always use descriptions like:

- More assertive
- More energetic
- More knowledgeable
- More determined
- More experienced

- More authoritative
- More competent
- More confident
- More passionate

Were these speakers truly more assertive, energetic, knowledgeable, determined, experienced, authoritative, competent, confident, and passionate? Who knows? But they came across that way.

But wait, there's more. Using a louder voice also:

- Keeps you from talking too quickly. Most people's lung capacity makes it very difficult for them to speak both loud and fast. Unless you're Michael Phelps, this should work.
- Invites more pauses. Because you have less breath to work with, you're more likely to pause, which slows you down and gives your audience time to digest your points.
- Helps you end sentences with periods instead of question marks. When speaking loudly, it's easy to end in a lower pitch, which sounds confident. It's much harder to engage in uptalk, which sounds unsure.

Even if you're on a microphone or a videoconferencing platform like Zoom or Microsoft Teams, maintain a loud, strong voice. Too many Zoom speakers drop to a conversational volume, not realizing they're also diminishing the power of their points and presence.

Finally, remind yourself and your colleagues that ensuring everyone can hear the speaker is entirely on the speaker, not the audience. No speaker is entitled to extra accommodation because they happen to be "a quiet person."

Gender-Specific Challenges

The benefits of being loud apply to both genders equally, but occasionally, a female student shares her concern that if she increases her volume, she'll be perceived as "aggressive" and turn the audience against her.

I don't pretend to be a scholar on gender bias, but when this happens, I survey the room.

"Did she sound aggressive?" I ask the other participants.

The typical response is a unanimous "no." Are they just being kind? Perhaps, so I ask another question: "How *did* she sound?"

Answers that come back typically include "strong," "confident," "authoritative," and "assertive"—not "aggressive" or "too loud."

I love to hear "assertive," in particular, because it indicates the presenter is *asserting* a point, not just sharing one.

This doesn't mean you'll never run into gender bias; many of you will. But consider the many speeches by women widely regarded as memorable, including:

- Michelle Obama's speeches at the 2016, 2020, and 2024 Democratic National Conventions (full disclosure: Michelle is my all-time favorite speaker,

perfectly combining moving text, high skill, and keen awareness and showcasing a mastery of ethos, logos, and pathos that would make Aristotle's jaw drop)

- The 2024 commencement speeches by Nobel Prize winner Maria Ressa (Harvard University), CEO Thasunda Brown Duckett (Howard University), and architect Jeanne Gang (University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign)
- The 2018 commencement speeches by Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Harvard University), soccer player Abby Wambach (Barnard College), and Oprah Winfrey (USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism)
- Meryl Streep's acceptance speech for the Cecil B. DeMille Award at the 2017 Golden Globes
- Viola Davis's acceptance speech for the 2017 Academy Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role
- The speeches by three of the last six Toastmasters World Champions of Public Speaking, Ramona J. Smith (2018), Verity Price (2021), and Jocelyn Tyson (2023)

My final suggestion to those who fear being perceived as "aggressive" or "shrill" is to ignore it. Don't modify your voice to accommodate sexist or other biases in your audience—that's their problem, not yours. Your job is to step up and speak up, even when your audience's job is to grow up.

Pause for Perfection

Many speakers worry that if they pause, the audience will think they've forgotten what they were going to say, like an actor who's forgotten their lines. The pause also feels awkward. You may be thinking: "Shouldn't I be speaking right now? Shouldn't *someone* be speaking?"

But pauses are not your enemy; they're your ally. Why? See below.

Pausing Enables Your Mind to Script Your Mouth

The best reason to pause is that it buys your mind the time it needs to construct precise statements. For many of us, our mouths run way ahead of our minds, spouting ideas before we've fully conceived them. Meanwhile, your mind is saying, "Slow your roll! I can pick more accurate words, arrange them in a more logical order, and even cut excess words if you just give me time to do it!"

Pausing gives your brain that critical time to script your mouth strategically, intelligently, and ultimately more effectively.

There's a way to test the power of pausing. In a moment, I'm going to ask you to answer this question out loud:

> "What do you like about your job and why?"

(If you hate your job, imagine a better one—this is just an exercise, not a performance review.)

But before you begin, think:

> "I have all the time in the world and can pause for as long and as many times as I need for my mind to script my mouth."

Okay, start. I'll wait.

Done?

Did the assignment feel easier with that mindset? Did your answer come out more fluidly and logically than you expected? The pauses should have helped.

Pausing Gives Your Audience Time to Digest Your Point

It takes substantially more time for your audience to process your point than for you to say it.

Reread that sentence.

Think about it, and don't continue reading until you understand it.

That's the benefit of reading—you can stop, reread, and think at your leisure.

A presentation audience has none of those processing advantages. While you've been practicing your point for weeks and thinking about it for even longer, you're asking your audience to—after hearing it for the first time—instantly digest it, consider it, evaluate it, and possibly apply it. Pausing gives your point critical time to sink in and be considered.

Pauses Can Silence Filler Words

As I mentioned earlier, the occasional filler or "crutch" words (like "um," "ah," and "uh," or "like," "so," and "right") may actually make a presenter sound more human and authentic. But if you use filler words so frequently that they are noticeable and distracting, an intervention is warranted to protect the clarity of your point.

How do we break these often unconscious habits? For many, using filler words is so routine and reflexive that you won't get far by simply telling yourself to stop. Counting the times you use them is another popular suggestion, but this will only make you self-conscious.

The trick to controlling this behavior is identifying your mind's favorite fillers and substituting another action in their place. In my experience, there's no better substitute for filler words than pauses.

Pauses are acceptable filler word replacements because they are virtually unnoticeable and rarely recalled. Often, a client will pause five or six times while speaking, but when I ask their coworkers how often the speaker paused, they'll say once or twice, if any.

You may notice these breaks, but your audience will not. Audiences rarely say, "That was a great presentation except for all the pauses."

It will take practice, but if you accept and embrace pauses, you'll be able to anticipate and replace upcoming filler words with penalty-free pauses.

Use Pauses to Slow Yourself Down

Naturally fast talkers (like me) have a disadvantage because our speaking speed can impede audience comprehension. At the same time, telling ourselves to slow down is about as effective as telling ourselves not to say "umm." Deliberately slowing your speaking rate may also have the undesired effect of reducing your energy.

Pausing helps you adjust your speed by stopping the quick thoughts coming from your mouth and enabling your mind to assert control as you resume.

Some studies even show that pausing *between* sentences makes you *sound* slower, even if you're actually saying the sentences as fast as you ordinarily do.

9

Open and Close with Your Point

I believe that education is all about being excited about something.

—Steve Irwin

Research on the concept of primacy and recency (look it up or ask an AI) demonstrates that the very first and very last parts of an experience—such as the beginning and end of a concert, sports event, or presentation—are most easily recalled.

For that reason alone, your point belongs in both. But all too often, presenters squander those opportunities by putting far less important content—like introductions, instructions, and filler material—in those positions. Here's how to convey points strategically as you open and close a presentation.

Start Strong

Starting strong means getting out your point quickly so your audience knows what they're about to receive and why. Place it *before* obligatory comments like self-introductions, thank yous, and instructions that would otherwise bury it.

The sole exception to the "nothing before your point" recommendation is a short, engaging hook, like a relevant moment from your week, a news item related to your point, or a provocative observation or question. This technique grabs and holds your audience's attention, priming them to receive your point.

Just remember to get in and out of the hook quickly. A long hook will squander that early, powerful opportunity to strike while the iron is hottest.

You may have noticed I didn't include "a joke" among the opening hooks. That was deliberate, because too many speakers think humor is necessary (it isn't) and try too hard to be funny (they shouldn't). Don't try to be humorous if you're not naturally funny. No joke is worth the credibility risk of coming off as inauthentic (or bombing). Even if you

are naturally witty, a personal story is much more valuable because it can introduce and illustrate your point. A joke is simply a moment of entertainment that comes and goes.

Stick the Landing

When you complete a presentation, the most powerful thing you can end with is your most valuable gift: your point (followed up by a call to action, if you have one).

I call this "sticking the landing" because it reminds me of an aerial gymnast hitting the mat solidly, with no extra steps.

I see many of those little steps when my students conclude their speeches, including:

- Ending with some variation of "That's all I've got" or "Well, that's the last slide" (as if the presentation was nothing more than a grueling endurance test)
- Ending on the last bit of data, as if there never was a takeaway point
- Mumbling the last line

I think most presenters who flub their endings fail because they don't have or know the point they want to end with. Without a point, they have nothing to conclude.

Pause After Your Point

All too often, I see the impact of a conclusion sabotaged by a presenter shifting immediately from a closing point to

obligatory meeting business, such as initiating a Q&A or introducing another speaker:

"This approach will enable us to save more lives than ever before—now let's bring up Sally for our next presentation."

Your concluding thought needs extra time to sink in. Plant a generous audio break between the end of your point and the start of the next piece of business:

> "This approach will help us save more lives than ever before."
>
> *(beat)*
>
> "Now, I'm happy to take some questions."

If your presentation is followed by a Q&A, don't let the last question and answer snatch the "recency" prize of being a highly remembered element. Instead, follow the Q&A with a brief final close, thanking participants and conveying your confidence in a better future resulting from the discourse that just occurred:

> "I want to thank our audience and all of our presenters and participants for their dedication to this mission/goal."
>
> *(beat)*
>
> "My hope is that this discussion—and more like it—will accelerate our ability to ultimately achieve [impact]."
>
> *(boom, mic drop)*

10

The Four Enemies of Point

Despite everything, I believe that people are really good at heart.

—Anne Frank

Even if you master all of the simple, effective, practical, and actionable tips in the preceding chapters, you may still encounter obstacles when trying to deliver your point. I've already talked about what to do if someone tries to drag you off your point, but there are other less obvious challenges, many of which come directly from within you.

Enemy #1: "And"

The first pitfall is the seemingly innocuous word "and." "And" is useful because it helps communicators add items to the shopping carts of their points. But these ideas fight each other for attention, ultimately diluting the impact of each. "And" is also the biggest driver of the "split ends" problem I described in Chapter 3.

Wherever you see a list of words or concepts (usually connected by the word "and"), ask yourself: Do I need all these descriptors that tax my audience's attention, or are some of them synonymous? Even if they're not synonyms, are some far more important than others?

Consider the first line of this chapter:

> *Even if you master all of the simple, effective, practical, and actionable tips . . .*

"Practical" and "actionable" in this context are virtual synonyms. "Simple," "smart," and "practical" convey different ideas and are independently meaningful, but are they equally relevant?

Speakers may think each new adjective or detail enhances clarity, but extra words can also have the opposite effect. We know that "less is more," but we need to also realize that more is less.

Compare the immediate impact of this line:

> *This approach will elevate and enhance our ability to be successful and save lives.*

To this one:

> *This approach will elevate our ability to save lives.*

To my eyes and ears, there's no question about which is more instantly engaging.

Always give your prepared speeches and reports the "and" audit, asking yourself each time: Do I need all of these qualifiers? What do I gain and lose by using only the strongest one? Chances are you'll gain more than you lose.

Last year, I conducted an "and" audit with a tech executive's conference speech and found nearly a dozen places where we could consolidate or cut unnecessary words and phrases. This process of elimination not only made the lines easier for her to say, but also made her point easier for the audience to process.

Enemy #2: Badjectives

You're not having a déjà vu moment. We talked about badjectives earlier, but it's worthwhile to double down on rejecting them as an enemy of point.

Badjectives—descriptors so broad that they convey no value—are deceptive because they *seem* to project a clear impression. Who wouldn't want to be part of something "excellent," "fantastic," "terrific," or "very good"?

The problem is that being so general robs your point of substance, and a point without substance is a Reuben without the corned beef.

A helpful tip to root out badjectives is to imagine your adjectives describing food and see if they truly convey meaning. What do we really know about a *great* hamburger, a *fantastic* sauce, or an *awesome* bowl of noodles? Very little. And when you're not conveying value, you're not conveying much of anything. Now, tell me about a *juicy* burger, a *spicy* sauce, or a *steaming hot* bowl of noodles, and suddenly I'm hungry again.

Whether you use them in a speech, an email, a compliment, or even a social media post, precise descriptors in your point have a more powerful impact on your audience. So, keep digging for words that most accurately say what you mean.

As examples, consider the following lines, corrected to replace badjectives with specific ideas:

> "This proposal ~~is great~~ will cut our costs by 20 percent."
>
> "This technology ~~is awesome~~ will enable us to save more lives. Let me show you how."
>
> "Laura, ~~that was a very good idea~~ your idea will help make our meetings much more productive! Thanks."
>
> "Global warming is ~~a big problem~~ an existential threat to humanity, and we must take steps to address it."

Enemy #3: Apologies

One of the few "nevers" I share in workshops is never to apologize or even say "excuse me." The problem with public

apologies is that they're like a neon sign around your neck saying, "I messed up." Audiences remember apologies, and the words alone can seriously damage the credibility you've built up to that point.

Remember that by sharing your valuable points, you're doing your audience a favor; your audience is not doing *you* a favor by listening. So, even if you have a word bobble, cough, or temporarily lose your place, there's no need to apologize or be excused. Just move on. If necessary, correct without an apology:

> "We had a 35 percent success rate—actually, a 75 percent success rate."

In a related "never," never say how nervous, unprepared, or intimidated you might be. You may feel these insecurities intensely, but don't reveal them because blurted admissions like these can diminish your credibility. If you're nervous, keep plowing through your presentation, knowing that it's the delivery of your point that matters, not the impression you're making personally.

Enemy #4: The "Department of Homeland Insecurity"

Take the number of people you know, subtract the number of in-laws you like, and multiply it by a schmabillion. Now, you have merely a fraction of the number of people frightened by the thought of giving a public presentation.

Many polls have revealed that people fear public speaking more than death. But let's be clear—public speaking

anxiety is not a fear of public speaking. It's a fear of public humiliation: What if I screw up and people think worse of me?

So, the solution doesn't have to be avoiding public speaking at all costs, but overcoming the fear of embarrassing yourself.

Who alerts you to the notion that you should be feeling embarrassment or shame?

You.

It's the voice inside your head that says:

"You're screwing up . . ."

"Everyone thinks you're boring . . ."

"You sound silly . . ."

"You look nervous . . . and you should be!"

Because this voice comes from inside and sounds like you, you're inclined to believe what it says. But that voice doesn't come from your rational mind; it comes from your internal Department of Homeland Insecurity (DHI)—where your insecurity lives.

One thing you should know about the DHI: They're liars. It's their job to make you feel insecure and second-guess yourself, and to sabotage your effort to convey confidence.

So why would you trust them?

I see the DHI's influence every time a client stops mid-sentence and sits down, or starts by saying, "This isn't going

to be very good . . ." or "Okay, here goes nothing . . . ," or ends with "Well, that sucked." DHI agents are masters at inducing self-sabotage and will not hesitate to lie to produce that outcome.

Those butterflies you feel before giving a speech? They aren't in your stomach; they're in your head. And they didn't hatch there; they were planted. By the insidious DHI.

When people ask me how to overcome public speaking anxiety, I focus on three ideas:

1. Know your point. Anyone who doesn't know their point *should* be nervous.
2. Know that the moment is not about you, your appearance, or your talent; it's about your point. All you have to do is *deliver* it.
3. Practice saying your speech *out loud*—not in your head. The most effective training involves both your mouth and your mind because they work together to communicate your point.

11

Making Points in Speeches

I believe that a creative career is
only as good as the risks you take with it.
—Cate Blanchett

There's a universe of advice out there on giving a good speech, but I guarantee you that the tactics discussed here—things like knowing your point, speaking loudly, and leveraging pauses—are more important than knowing how to breathe, gesture, stand, and dress sharp. Why? Because it's one thing to *look like* you know what you're talking about and another to convey your point successfully.

Whether you're sweating bullets or cool as a cucumber, here are a few primary questions to ask yourself.

Am I Reading from a Script?

Unless you're giving a keynote address, running for office, or using a teleprompter, you probably don't need to—and shouldn't!—write a word-for-word speech.

The biggest reason not to write a speech is that you don't want to *read* a speech. Reading forces you to look down often and lose eye contact—and eye contact is crucial to engaging your audience. It's tough to read to an audience and come across as heartfelt at the same time. The best speeches make it seem like you're spontaneously sharing a fresh idea, not reading from a script written days or weeks ago.

Our brains also process writing and reading differently from presenting. When we write and read, we are conditioned to use more complex and dispassionate text. When we extemporaneously present, we communicate more simply, directly, and, sometimes, emotionally. As a result, reading or memorizing a written script often sounds less natural, less authentic, and less passionate.

If you're writing a script to mitigate nerves, you're focusing on the wrong solution *and* sabotaging your goal. I've seen more than a few speech readers lose their place in a script and have trouble finding it again (which can, justifiably, make you extremely nervous).

If you're hung up on giving a "perfect" speech and think having a script is the best way to achieve that objective, remember that you're not in a public speaking competition. Your job is to engage and inspire, not impress. And

in this job, spontaneity and authenticity eat precision for breakfast.

Did I Unveil My Point in the First Thirty Seconds?

Don't treat your point like a movie's climax or a spoiler; bring it out early so your audience knows where you're taking them and why.

Did I Make Useful Notes for Myself?

Once you have your main point and a few examples or subpoints, write them down on a small notecard, using as few words as possible and no complete sentences. Notes have only one purpose: to remind you about the points you need to make and the details you might otherwise forget, like statistics or names. Nothing else belongs in your notes.

Before I watch my clients' speeches, I look at their notes. If I can make enough sense of those notes to give the speech myself, there's too much information, and I ask the client to boil them down further. I'm looking for notes that are so cheat sheet–like that they make no sense to anyone but the speaker.

As their practice progresses, speakers should notice how little they rely on their notes and cut them down accordingly. What starts as a full-page single-spaced outline should boil down to a notecard whose contents resemble a supermarket shopping list (item three on a shopping list doesn't say, "pick a head of cabbage, examine it, put it in a bag, then place it in your cart"; it just says "cabbage").

I Know This Subject Well. Can I Wing It?

Some think their vast knowledge or experience imbues them with the innate ability to communicate that knowledge effectively. I've seen it repeatedly—particularly from lawyers and professors—and it's almost always a recipe for a rambling disaster.

One senior executive I knew years ago enjoyed following up big staff presentations with "a thought or two" that typically lasted an hour or more. With prepared notes rolled up in his hand, he shared what he thought was an inspiring stream of insight. At best, he did no harm, but few (if any) of the things he said were remembered or had a meaningful impact. At worst, his audience resented him for keeping them hostage.

Bottom line: If you're tempted to wing it, ground yourself. Identify your most valuable point, lead with it, and keep supporting it.

Did I Practice Right?

You already know that practice is essential, but as I mentioned earlier, the critical piece of presentation practice is delivering the speech out loud (not in your head) and in real time (not mumbling or rushing).

It may be tempting to practice in front of a mirror, but when we look at our reflection, we never ask, "Am I making my point effectively?" Instead, we're distracted by our physical appearance: Is my hair in place? Do I look silly?

Are my teeth white? This instinct toward vanity (and assessing physical qualities that matter relatively little) makes it challenging to use mirrors to improve the conveyance of points.

Am I Telling a Strategic Story?

Audiences love hearing stories. But a story without relevance is just a story, nothing more. See the next chapter for insights on telling a story strategically.

12

Making Points in Stories

I believe purpose is something for which one is responsible; it's not just divinely assigned.

—Michael J. Fox

The importance of storytelling in communications is no secret. The concept is promoted frequently in books, conferences, articles, seminars, and podcasts, and for good reason.

Storytelling is a uniquely valuable communication tool because humans are naturally attracted to narratives. Consequently, communicators always benefit from including stories and case studies.

Through the work of neuroscientists like Dr. Paul Zak, we've learned that stories trigger the release of oxytocin, a hormone associated with empathy, trust, and generosity that makes us remember and care about what we're hearing. Some studies even connect increased oxytocin levels to larger donations to a cause.

End of story? Not yet, because in the language of leadership, the story is not the most critical part of the story. (No, that's not a typo.)

In the context of presentations, a story doesn't justify its own existence. It optimally exists as a vehicle through which a meaningful point travels. And if leaders don't successfully convey the important points their stories illustrate, those stories may well be riveting but not relevant.

That's a severe handicap because leaders need to engage and inspire, not simply entertain.

How a story connects to a point is not your audience's job to figure out; it's your job to understand and convey this. That responsibility makes the inclusion of transition lines like these even more crucial than the story itself:

> "This story illustrates why we must . . ."
>
> "This case study exemplifies the importance of . . ."
>
> "This moment was pivotal in launching my appreciation for . . ."

Without that explicit connection, your story will not serve a clear purpose.

Any true story can help propel a point—the clever thing your six-year-old said, something from your personal history, an incident you witnessed at a processing plant. The key is connecting the interesting moment to an imperative message.

For example, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz has been known to talk about an accident that left his father unable to work when Howard was a child and how that drives his interest in caring for Starbucks employees. Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh told stories about his early days at the company, when he recognized the value of building a corporate culture.

These stories don't have to be cinematic or shocking. For example:

- A CEO's story about their first job can *illustrate their appreciation of hard work*.
- An insurance salesperson's story about an earthquake can *demonstrate the need for people to prepare for disasters*.
- An animal welfare advocate's story about a rescued pit bull can *prove the need for stronger animal cruelty laws*.

13

Making Points in PowerPoint

I believe that the most meaningful way to succeed is to help other people succeed.

—Adam Grant

Some of the biggest debates in business communication (this field can be surprisingly controversial) are about slide-based presentation tools like PowerPoint, which has evolved remarkably little since the mid-'90s.

Some communication experts encourage abstract visuals with few or no words, while others consider strategic titles and bulleted text integral to an effective PowerPoint slide.

Wherever you stand, there will always be many questions to consider, including what to emphasize and how to emphasize it, what to say but not show, and what to show but not say.

I'm a fan of the assertion–evidence presentation approach developed by Michael Alley, a professor of engineering communication at Pennsylvania State University. Supported by adult learning research, the technique recommends a succinct "assertion" title followed by supporting visual evidence rather than a "topic" title and a list of bullet points.

Proponents say this approach emphasizes clarity and persuasion, resulting in not only better-understood and remembered ideas, but stronger internal feelings and external projections of confidence.

Combining this methodology with the philosophy of slide design guru Nancy Duarte and what I've witnessed and counseled myself, I consider these the most audience-challenging flaws of PowerPoint presentations:

- Slides with broad titles that convey categories, themes, and topics but not the page's driving point
- Slides containing too many words that compete with spoken words, creating "cognitive overload"

- Cluttered slides that make it difficult for audiences to know where to look or what to prioritize
- Slides that contain unreadable chart elements
- Slides that do not directly support the presentation's overall point

While no one can argue with these design flaws, we didn't come here to learn what's wrong but to apply what's right. So here are the fixes.

Make the Point of Each Slide Clear in the Title

The title space at the top of each slide is prime real estate. It's the content your audience will read first and the element they'll look to for clues about the slide's central point. But that space is squandered when presenters fill it with generic phrases and simple categories like "Background," "Data," "Consumer Trends," "Our Partnerships," and "Why This Matters."

If you haven't done this yourself, you've undoubtedly seen it done. Such titles say little to nothing about the point of the slide, giving a dry hint about which drawer to file the content in rather than promoting and selling it.

Making your titles meaningful requires understanding the purpose of each slide. Here are a few suggestions on how you might evolve slide titles like the previous ones from forgettable to relevant:

- "Background" or "History" becomes "Our History Holds Clues to Our Future"

- "Data" or "Our Numbers" becomes "Users Respond Positively to Our AI Tools"
- "Consumer Trends" or "Industry Analysis" becomes "US Customers Still Prefer Online Shopping"

Shorten or Remove All Complete Sentences

Reading abundant text while listening to a presenter speak taxes an audience's ability to comprehend the content (in this "eye–ear conflict," the eye often wins). To facilitate content digestion and keep slide visuals in their appropriate supporting role, eliminate complete sentences and break up or simplify compound sentences.

Bullets don't need to be banned, but limit them to five, consider making them appear one at a time for isolated elaboration, and restrict them to necessary examples, attributes, or checklists, not complete ideas or points.

Make Sure All Text and Charts Are Readable from the Back of the Room

If your audience can't easily read your text or charts—including axis and other labels—those elements are squandering space.

Making sure your content can be seen may sound obvious, but sometimes, presenters are too close to their presentations—literally. What is readable on your laptop may be far less so when projected on a screen.

This is a wise opportunity to choose "comprehension" over "comprehensive." It's better to have a simple slide that everyone can easily process than an overstuffed slide that's legible only with a magnifying glass.

If all the content is necessary, consider distributing one slide's pieces across several slides. This focuses more attention on each element, and because you're saying the same thing, just clicking more, you don't lose time.

No presenter should ever feel compelled to say, "I know this may be hard to read, but . . ." #Epicfail.

Ensure Each Slide Makes a Point, and Say That Point

Every slide should ideally represent one specific point. Know what that point is, and convey it explicitly in your remarks:

"These findings demonstrate why . . ."

"The approaches enable us to . . ."

"These partnerships are critical to our . . ."

Note that these remarks should not merely describe the content ("Here are some approaches"); they should express the purpose and impact of that content ("These approaches enable us to reach our target customers").

Also remember to reinforce the slide's point in its title space. This is a point title:

"43% of Parents Let Preteens Use Social Media"

These are non-point titles:

"Statistics"

"By the Numbers"

"Letting Kids Use Social Media"

"Parents, Kids, and Social Media"

Presentation design expert Nancy Duarte puts it best in her *Harvard Business Review* article "When Presenting Your Data, Get to the Point Fast": "Data slides aren't really about the data. They're about the meaning of the data. It's up to you to make that meaning clear before you click away. Otherwise, the audience won't process—let alone buy—your argument."

No matter how stunning a slide is, consider reimagining or cutting it if it doesn't make a substantial point. Your goal is not to have the audience say "Ooh!" to a beautiful slide but "Oh!" to a brilliant point.

Some presentation gurus recommend slides that contain only a single keyword like "Grit" or "Innovate" or a non-specific phrase like "Follow your kite." They argue that audiences will remember these simple phrases better than a list of bullets.

Maybe they will—but even if the audience remembers "Grit" or "Follow your kite," what will those ideas mean later, when separated from their context? Probably about as much as the last proverb you pulled from a fortune cookie.

A presentation isn't a memory test. Audiences often take notes and can typically receive the PowerPoint decks

afterward, so why deliver cryptic content when you could be sharing slides with built-in substance?

Present to Your Audience, Not to Your Data

Many presenters look at their slides while presenting, as if the screen is their audience. But your screen doesn't care what you say. Your *audience* is your audience; they receive your points best when you look them in the eye. This doesn't mean you should never look at your data—just don't have a conversation with it. Glance at your slides for reference, but stop, turn, and make critical points directly to your listeners.

Make Sure Your Slides Support You, Not the Other Way Around

I often see presenters at the far side of the room or in their seats, clickers in hand, reading their slides as they cycle through them. Other speakers present in near complete darkness so their slides can be more brightly illuminated.

In each of these scenarios, the speaker has ceded their crucial role as point conveyer—and the authority and credibility attached to that role—to a piece of technology.

The speaker is diminished, and the technology is exalted.

Your PowerPoint deck didn't get a college degree, never worked a day in its life, and is nowhere near as educated, qualified, and credible as you are. So why are you taking the back seat?

Good presenters don't let their tech toys make points on their behalf. They stand in the center of the speaking area, fully in the light, conveying points supported by the slides behind them.

When I use PowerPoint, I don't mind blocking the audience's view of the screen. I know they'll see it eventually, and my primary goal is for them to get my points directly from me, the most qualified person in the room to make them. Technology always plays a supporting role.

14

Making Points in Email

I believe fundamental honesty
is the keystone of business.
—Harvey S. Firestone

Making points clearly in email is as important as in any other communication. But too often, emailers make mistakes that seriously detract from the impression their points leave on the reader. Here's a set of checks I run through before I hit "send" to ensure I'm conveying my points in the strongest way possible.

Is My Point in the Subject Line?

The subject line is the first impression your point makes on a recipient, so instant clarity is essential. Yet, many emails have subject lines that are so general that they're virtually meaningless.

Aim to be clear and concise to make the best use of the space ("Thoughts on infrastructure proposal"), and don't be afraid to change a thread's subject line if it has become obsolete or you're taking it in a new direction. Nothing is more misdirecting than a new thought living under an old subject line.

As I write this, some of the subject lines in my inbox include:

"Wednesday"

"Re: Feedback"

"2.7K views"

"Meeting"

"Your email"

"Re: Re: Today"

Can you tell me what the points of these emails are? Neither can I.

Imagine a critically important executive directive or idea buried within a thread under the subject line "Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Q4." Some recipients may never even open it if they've decided the thread is no longer relevant to them or otherwise obsolete.

Here are some examples of more intuitive subject lines:

"Inventory report analysis"

"Apple partnership notes"

"Celebrity video idea"

It's also good practice to use all-capital subject line tags to indicate very urgent needs or imperatives, like so:

"URGENT: [Xxx]"

"POLICY CHANGE: [Xxx]"

"ACTION REQUESTED: [Xxx]"

"MEETING CHANGE: [Xxx]"

Could This Be Better Explained in Bullets?

If this question is already in your head, the answer is probably yes. Bullets are a point's flashlight. They say, "I'm breaking this down for you." To use bullets effectively, first state your point clearly, then make your case one by one:

Using our in-house talent in place of external vendors will:

- Eliminate markups from expensive vendors
- Create new opportunities for staff development and skill diversification
- Enable us to control the project from beginning to end and make as many revisions as we feel necessary

As a reader, compare that to:

> This in-house approach will benefit the company because it will eliminate the need for expensive vendors who often mark up the cost of their services, create new opportunities for staff to develop and expand their range of skills, and enable us to control the project from beginning to end, as well as making as many revisions as we deem necessary.

Which version leaves you with a clearer understanding of the emailer's argument?

Finally, be careful about the kind of bullets you choose, because that choice can convey more about your points than you may think. While standard round bullets are neutral, numbers indicate that the items are purposefully ordered or ranked, and checkmarks indicate a list of to-dos or completed tasks. Unless you intend to imply one of those conditions, stick to standard bullets.

If I Raised an Issue, Did I Suggest a Solution?

A former boss of mine mandated that anyone sharing a criticism must also offer a corrective suggestion. That rule made an enormous difference in both productivity and morale at our staff meetings. No one likes a hit-and-run naysayer, and the most welcome and fairly considered points are constructive, not destructive.

Do I Have Paragraphs Longer Than Three Sentences?

One of my easiest and most appreciated email tips is this: Restrict all paragraphs to three sentences or fewer. Three is actually generous—I write many, if not mostly, one- and two-sentence paragraphs. Here's why this limit makes a difference:

- An email broken into chunks is less intimidating to read than a "wall of words."
- Major points, questions, action steps, and deadlines are not buried within long blocks of text.
- Redundant words and sentences are easier for the email writer to spot.
- Boiling down the content helps the sender create more precise points.
- Shorter paragraphs help the receiver follow and understand the points.

The three-sentence rule is like an all-purpose household cleaner. If you like what it does to your emails, try it to polish your blogs, articles, and reports.

Are My Facts Accurate and My Grammar Correct?

Business emails rely on credibility—an implicit trust that the sender is sharing truths, not "alternative facts." So, be

a fastidious fact checker. Spelling and grammar mistakes—even if they're typos—can also injure your credibility and distract readers. Always reread, read aloud, and spell-check your emails before sending them. If you want to be extra careful, review them again in a different or larger font for a fresh look at the content.

Did I End with a Suggestion, a Recommendation, or a Proposal?

Remember, your point needs to be sold, not just shared. So why leave the next step to chance? Reinforce your point with a specific recommendation or suggestion: "Let's meet again next Thursday" or "I suggest we make Alyssa the lead and ask her to put together a project plan."

Concluding the email with a specific recommendation or next step—such as delegating a responsibility, suggesting a next meeting date, proposing the formation of a committee, or volunteering to take action yourself—gives it momentum and induces a response.

15

Making Points in Work Chats

I believe ideas matter; the good ones deserve reverence, and the bad ones, defiance.

—Nancy Gibbs

These days, many work teams communicate through chat programs like Microsoft Teams, Slack, Google Chat, and Cisco Jabber rather than email. According to a November 2024 Indeed article, more than 40 percent of American workers communicate through instant messaging at work (rising to 71 percent for workers in the tech industry).

And why not? It's certainly easier and faster to "ping" points to a colleague than to construct an email with subject lines and obligatory hellos and goodbyes. (This is also

why your older kids want you to text them, not email or call them.)

But just as you wouldn't use email for what should be a face-to-face conversation—for example, when the situation requires a dialogue, not a directive—don't use chat for what should be an email or meeting. Always assess your communication tools to ensure the one you choose best serves your points and purpose.

Choosing Between Email and Chat

Email is your best tool when:

- You don't expect a back-and-forth conversation.
- Your point requires examples or evidence.
- Your communication isn't extremely time-sensitive.
- The communication requires bullets, attachments, or multiple images.
- You need the ability to archive and search communication threads.
- You're communicating with more than three people.

Chat is your best tool when:

- You expect immediate back-and-forth.
- You have an urgent message.

- You can state your entire point or concern within two lines.
- You can respond with an appropriate emoji.
- You don't need to archive the communication.

Before You Chat

Because work chat apps are simple to use and operate like familiar social media apps, you may be tempted to chat impulsively—which can lead to miscommunications and mistakes. How many times have you reacted to a new chat message with "Huh?" To avoid miscues, take a moment to consider your point (what you're suggesting) and your purpose (why you're suggesting it) before you type anything. If you discover your chat doesn't have a clear point and purpose, reconsider the need for it.

Also, double-check that your chat is going to the right person. Chat programs often autofill names as you type them, so it's easy to mistakenly send a message too CEO Mary Smith instead of colleague Mark South. Not being careful with your addresses could lead to a regrettable mistake.

While You Chat

Here are some additional tips:

- Stick to *one purpose per message* and *one point per line*. Chats happen in a tiny space, making compounded and complicated points challenging

for the sender to convey and for the recipient to process.

- Use emojis functionally, not ornamentally. A thumbs-up says "I agree" or "I like this idea," but a random string of puppies and flowers dilutes the impact of your point. Even a smile can be misread.

- Respond, don't react. A response is a measured and thought-out reply, often including an acknowledgment, that moves the conversation toward action and solution. A reaction is an emotional and impulsive reply, often including a defense, that can detour into analysis paralysis or conflict. If something or someone makes you angry in chat, take a breath and put yourself in problem-solving mode.

- Read each message aloud before you send it. As with any text you write, speaking it is the best way to ensure your point is clear and your grammar is correct. This will also help you realize if you're chatting needlessly or provocatively.

- Keep an eye on the dialogue as it progresses. If the subject becomes too complex for chatting or you've reached an impasse, suggest moving the conversation to a face-to-face meeting, where points have more time to be conveyed and considered.

16

Making Points in Videoconferences

I believe that you should gravitate to people who are doing productive and positive things with their lives.

—Nadia Comaneci

Virtual meetings shifted from a useful tool to an absolute necessity when the COVID-19 pandemic sent millions of office workers home in 2020. In many ways, we've never looked back. That said, I see many clients who—despite years of delivering presentations—still don't understand how their voice, framing, and positioning play influential roles in supporting or sabotaging their points in videoconferences.

Here's a reminder.

Make Eye Contact

Eye contact is a critical communication practice, but in a videoconference, looking into someone's eyes means looking into the tiny black dot of your computer's internal or external camera, not looking at the faces of your colleagues on the screen.

Doing this feels awkward because it confuses our senses—we've spent our whole lives looking into the faces of people we're talking to, but the camera is typically just above our eyeline, forcing us to look up at it. To counter this, lower your monitor slightly so that you're looking directly into the camera (and down a bit to see the screen).

Although it's unnecessary to look into the camera all the time, making direct eye contact (through the camera) enhances your connection with your audience when delivering your most important points, having a 1:1 meeting, or responding directly to an individual.

Practice looking into your camera during virtual meetings. The more you do it, the more comfortable that behavior will become.

Frame Yourself Wisely

During an in-person conference, your sole contribution to the visual environment is your body, but in a virtual meeting, you contribute substantially to the environmental experience, providing both foreground and background. Your framing is important—I'm always surprised when

people don't look at themselves in a virtual meeting. If they did, they might notice they're too close or too far away, their heads are cut off, they're entirely in shadow, or they have something distracting behind them.

I recommend filling the frame as much as possible with your head and shoulders and keeping the camera at or just above eye level. You, not your room, should dominate the screen.

Be very mindful of your background. Cluttered rooms may make you seem disorganized, and unique toys, objects, and posters—while adding character—may distract people from the points you're making. Choose environments with simple backgrounds that reflect your expertise or professionalism, and remember: Anything in the frame not supporting your point is stealing attention from your point (including your family and pets).

Virtual backgrounds should generally be avoided, as they insert glaringly artificial elements into an experience that should feel natural and real. Those sensory mismatches can diminish your authenticity and pull attention from your message.

Keep Your Voice Strong

As discussed in Chapter 8, the benefits of increasing volume go beyond audibility. Loud voices convey confidence, authority, credibility, and competence, but only if you use them. Don't let the presence of a microphone and a screen

rob you and your point of the opportunity to make a stronger impression.

Stay Focused and Present

In a virtual meeting, it's easy to forget you're being watched, even though meeting participants tend to be observed more in a videoconference than in a live meeting. It's also easier during a virtual meeting to be distracted by your phone, email, child, pet, or proximity to your coffeemaker.

Manage these pitfalls by being extra mindful. Turn off your email, put away your phone, and eliminate other distractions. Remember also that you're always "on camera" and that everything you do—from how closely you pay attention to whether you eat or drink—reflects on your leadership.

17

Making Points in Job Interviews

I believe the returns on investment in the poor are just as exciting as successes achieved in the business arena, and they are even more meaningful.

—Bill Gates

If you look on the internet for job interview tips, you'll find a gold mine of resources for addressing some of the most popular questions, including "Tell us about yourself,"

"What are your strengths and weaknesses?" and "Why do you want to work here?"

While this can help you prepare your responses, how you deliver those responses will significantly impact the interviewer's perception of you. You want to make an overall impression of confidence and clarity. How do you do that?

First, understand the distinct points of a resume, a cover letter, and an interview. The resume primarily says, "I can do the job." The cover letter primarily says, "This is why I want the job." The interview says, "This is why you should want me."

With that in mind, here are some tips to elevate your presence and your points in job interviews.

Raise Your Volume

The advice I offered earlier about speaking loudly doesn't apply only to presentations and videoconferences. Raising your volume in an interview will more effectively grab and sustain your interviewer's attention. A louder voice projects passion and excitement, which will come across as enthusiasm for the job opportunity.

Be Succinct

Given the value of your interviewers' time and the number of applicants they need to meet, they want and need you to be efficient with your words.

Answer each question directly, and include only the most pertinent elements. Compare these two responses to "Tell us about a successful project you're proud of":

> **Answer 1:** "As the project lead, I brainstormed the idea with my team of seven in 2024, and we submitted it for approval to the department director and, later, to the senior vice president. After it was approved, I met with the design team, and we developed a logo, iconography, and fonts. There were lots of moving parts involving multiple departments, but regular check-ins kept us on track. We tested it three times with potential users and created a detailed internal and external launch plan involving all of our communication teams. After it launched, we saw public engagement increase by 23 percent, thanks in large part to the participation of key social media influencers. Later that year, my team and I won a quarterly internal innovation award presented by the CEO and the executive team." (133 words)

> **Answer 2:** "I brainstormed the idea with my team last year and led the project. There were many moving parts involving multiple departments, but regular check-ins kept us on track. After launch, we saw a 23 percent increase in public engagement, which was boosted by partnering with key influencers. I'm also thrilled the team received an innovation award from the CEO for our work." (62 words)

Are you familiar with the acronym TL;DR ("Too long; didn't read")? If you consider the R to also stand for "receive," you know why answer 2 beats answer 1.

Speak Decisively

Be decisive in your responses to each interview question, just like when you're delivering a speech's point or a call to action.

When I was interviewed several years ago for a speechwriting position, I was asked whether or not I would support a controversial tactic.

> **Wrong answer:** "I can see both sides."
>
> **Correct answer:** "I would [support/not support] the tactic because it would result in [beneficial result/detrimental result]."

Remember, you're not an expert on the organization's work yet, so making a decisive point is more important than giving the "right" answer.

Reimagine Failings as Learnings

Plan to hear questions about your shortcomings, like "What are your strengths and failures?" "Tell me about a time you failed," and "What are some of your weaknesses?"

Despite their seeming interest in stories of defeat, these hiring coordinators and potential colleagues most want to know *what you learn from failure* and *how you overcome weakness*.

So, make your key points about learning and overcoming, not underperforming and dropping the ball.

Tell Stories and Give Examples

Humans always prefer stories and examples to wordy explanations, and stories tend to humanize interviewees, so look for narratives or examples you can use to illustrate and add color to your answers.

You won't get graded on your story; you're simply using it to illustrate points about your ability. So, stick to what happened and what you learned from it, and keep it concise. As noted in the section about being succinct, tell only as much of the story as you need to illustrate your point, not as much as you can to keep it engrossing.

18

Making Points as a Conference Panelist

I believe you have to be willing to be misunderstood if you're going to innovate.

—Jeff Bezos

If you're a relatively successful thought leader, famous, or just LinkedIn friends with an event organizer, sooner or later you may be asked to sit on a conference panel.

Some people think being a panelist is easier than being a speaker, but consider all the panelist's obligations: asserting your key points; responding to live questions; appearing both knowledgeable and open to ideas; comfortably interacting with panelists, the moderator, and the audience; and carefully straddling the line between saying too much and too little.

Like with a speech, success as a panelist depends on your ability to identify and convey your key points. No matter what else happens during that hour—irrelevant questions from the moderator, combative reactions from the audience, grandstanding by a copanelist—it's your job to make sure you do what you came to do.

Because of all these moving parts, preparation is critical—but it's often overlooked. "I can wing it," say some panelists, thinking expertise and knowledge alone can carry them. Very often, they crash and burn.

This checklist will help you stay on point while in the chair:

☐ Did I prepare my points in advance?

Prepare two or three points that showcase your expertise, connect to the mission of the event, and provide practical advice for the audience. If you want help fine-tuning them, reach out to the panel's moderator, with whom you should be in contact anyway.

☐ **Do I have supporting data in my head?**

Keep data, case studies, and specific examples in mind—and in your notes—and be prepared to raise them *and* connect them explicitly to your points.

☐ **Am I ready to jump in?**

When you want to comment on another panelist's point, use connectors like "Building on Sarah's point . . ." or "I'd like to go back to something Jacob said . . ."

☐ **Did I bring a strategic story?**

As in a speech, a relevant personal story—the more personal, the better—can go a long way toward illustrating your point and improving its resonance.

☐ **Am I conveying my points or amplifying theirs?**

If the conversation takes a wrong turn, don't follow it down that rabbit hole. Steer it back to your points with a transition like:

"That's an important issue, but let's remember the key point: [point]."

"I hear you. But my point of view is that [point]."

"There's been a lot of conversation about this, but here's the thing: [point]."

☐ Am I speaking in complete sentences?

Answering in complete sentences makes your point and its context clearer, which is especially important for those who missed hearing the question. It also helps you frame your idea as a substantial point. Here's an example:

Q: "Bob, do you think social media has enhanced our democracy?"

Bob's "meh" response: "Sure it has. Look at all the social conversations inspired by the past election. In fact, where I work, we designed an awesome social media platform."

Bob's better response: "Yes, I absolutely believe social media has the power to enhance our democracy. Look at all the social conversations inspired by the past election. In fact, at Green Poodle Digital, we designed a highly interactive forum to encourage the exchange of meaningful ideas."

☐ Am I aware of myself?

Remember, the audience is always watching you (and cameras might be too). As long as you're in that seat, look interested, nod at others' good points, and don't do anything that would embarrass your mother if she were in the audience.

Speaking of your mom, some of her other rules also apply here: Speak up, sit up straight, don't talk when others are talking, and don't touch your face.

19

Making Points When Thanking Others

I believe that the dance came from the people,
and . . . should always be delivered back to the people.
—Alvin Ailey

We tend not to think too hard about giving credit and appreciation, especially in the workplace. But publicly praising a colleague or group benefits both them and you.

(When thanking groups, make sure to use gender-neutral references like "you all" and "everyone" versus "you

guys" so the respect you feel is reflected in the respect you convey.)

Public appreciation can boost team morale and inspire more exemplary work. It also demonstrates that you're a team player who cares about supporting your coworkers. That's a win-win, whether the expression comes in a speech, during a meeting, in an email or chat group, or via a workplace social media platform.

But while you have more than 170,000 English words to choose from to create a nifty compliment, not all word combinations and phrases have the same impact.

The two words most often relied on—"thank you"—actually convey little meaningful appreciation to the recipient. All that says is, "You did something I noticed." It registers as polite but not substantially praising.

The four categories below can help you better understand how to say thanks in a way that delivers the impact you want. (You can thank me later.)

Powerful: Stories

A story is a short but detailed narrative that illustrates the behavior you're praising:

> "When we lost power at Thursday's meeting, we feared we'd have to cancel because Kelly relied on PowerPoint. But she brought paper copies of her presentation, which enabled us to follow along. That

demonstrates Kelly's ability to anticipate and prepare for sudden challenges, something all good speakers should have."

Sharing a relevant and detailed story conveys an authentic understanding of your subject's effort and impact, which is more meaningful to them—and reflects well on you.

Meaningful: Examples

An example briefly shares an instance of laudable behavior:

> "For example, last week Kelly brought paper copies of her PowerPoint presentation in case we had tech issues, which we did."

An example justifies your praise and, as a result, reinforces it. But in its brevity, an example doesn't project the same level of insight and appreciation as a story. An example provides evidence. A story conveys understanding. Stories are also more riveting than examples.

Satisfactory: Generic Statements

In the context of appreciation, a generic statement is a basic declaration that explains but does not illustrate or substantiate:

> "Kelly's work ethic demonstrates a dedicated commitment to strong preparation."

A generic statement relies on broad words that can easily apply to other people and scenarios. Even if you choose

your words carefully, no generic statement can hold a candle to the impact of using specific examples and stories.

Least Powerful: Adjectives

An adjective is a word that describes a person or act:

> "Kelly is very resourceful."

The least potent form of compliment, adjectives merely indicate someone has done something relatively positive. The descriptor is so brief and shallow that it holds limited lasting value.

Choosing the most powerful form of appreciation takes more time and effort, but the amount of work you put into your compliment correlates directly to the impact it will have.

20

I Get By with a Little Help from AI

I believe everyone should have a broad picture of how the universe operates and our place in it. It is a basic human desire. And it also puts our worries in perspective.

—Stephen Hawking

Generative AI—the kind of artificial intelligence that creates text and images from prompts—has been applauded, criticized, glorified, and demonized, and each of those viewpoints may be valid depending on how you

use it. I consider GenAI a helpful tool if you use it to support you, not script you; to help you improve your point, not make it for you.

What text-focused GenAI tools like ChatGPT, Copilot (Microsoft), Gemini (Google), Claude, and Perplexity do best is *suggest ideas*, such as a list of interview questions, a biography, an outline, a quote, an example, or a rewrite.

But if you let these tools script you without giving the output a thorough review, you're sabotaging some of your greatest strengths as a communicator: your unique voice, your expert perspective, and your authenticity (not to mention, potentially, your accuracy).

My colleague Allison Shapira, a longtime speaker and writer in the field of leadership communications, has spent several years researching ways people can use artificial intelligence to help them become more effective communicators without sacrificing authenticity.

She created an "AI Authenticity Loop" that threads vital human communication roles, like identifying a challenge or need, critical thinking and assessment, and capturing and sustaining an authentic voice, with time-saving and productive AI capabilities, like brainstorming, drafting, research, feedback, and editing.

"You can use AI tools to efficiently brainstorm, develop, fine-tune, and even practice your message," Allison told me, "But make sure to filter and present it through the lens of your unique authenticity, expertise, and humanity."

Any AI expert—which by now may be one out of every twenty-five people—will tell you: The better your prompt, the better the product.

Keeping that in mind, here are some basic prompts for communicators new to AI:

- "Act as a keynote speaker. Create an outline for a [time]-minute speech for [audience] that contends [point]."
- "Act as a feature writer. Find a real-life human story that illustrates [point]."
- "Act as a researcher. Find statistical evidence that proves [point]."
- "Act as a debater. Give me logical arguments that reinforce the argument [point]."
- "Act as a librarian. Find me famous thought leaders who support the idea [point]."
- "Suggest an engaging opening hook for a speech that contends [point]."

I recently fed Gemini some of these prompts, using a range of topics. The responses were lightning-fast, including compelling real-life stories, specific contemporary research, concise and well-curated biographies, and a variety of opening hooks such as hypothetical scenarios, rhetorical questions, provocative statements, and humorous anecdotes.

Just remember: Do not treat AI results as perfect or gospel. Edit the suggestions to make sure they make sense, match your needs, and sound like you.

21

Train Your People to Make Points

I believe the children are our future.
Teach them well and let them lead the way.
—Whitney Houston

No matter where they sit in a company hierarchy, *everyone* can benefit from conveying real points. So, don't keep these ideas to yourself. Train your staff to identify and effectively communicate their own points. Others will notice.

Good ways to start:

- If you supervise staff, encourage them during your 1:1 meetings to use phrases like "I recommend" and "I suggest." If they don't do it naturally, ask them, "What do you recommend? What do you suggest?" Eventually, they'll get the hint.
- Run group exercises in which your staff practice expressing points as "I believe" statements. This exercise is helpful with a group or team because, in my experience, people learn as much by listening to others formulating points as they do by formulating their own.
- Challenge employees to be louder, to employ more pauses, and to find and articulate their highest value propositions.
- Encourage qualified members of your staff to take speaking roles at internal meetings and conferences. Real-world practice builds confidence and strength.
- For staff members who are terrified of public speaking, I recommend they join a local Toastmasters club. What Toastmasters International does best is make nervous speakers feel more comfortable presenting.
- Give them this book. It can't hurt.

Conclusion

Champion Your Points

I believe that anyone can conquer fear by doing the things he fears to do, provided he keeps doing them.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

Let's revisit Einstein's quotation from the very start of this book:

> *"If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough."*

Einstein knew—and you know—that ideas are powerful. But that power is merely potential until you understand your ideas thoroughly enough to champion them as points.

The good news is that anyone can take that step, including you. Your point can make people feel, think, and act—ultimately changing the world in some way—because points,

not topics, sway minds, galvanize audiences, and make a difference.

It's time you get to yours.

Recommended Reading

101 Ways to Open a Speech
By Brad Phillips
ISBN: 9780988322035
SpeakGood Press

The Craft of Scientific Presentations: Critical Steps to Succeed and Critical Errors to Avoid
By Michael Alley
ISBN: 9781441982780
Springer

The First Minute: How to Start Conversations That Get Results
By Chris Fenning
ISBN: 9781838244002
Alignment Group Ltd.

Flux: 8 Superpowers for Thriving in Constant Change
By April Rinne
ISBN: 9781523093595
Berrett-Koehler

Influence
By Robert Cialdini
ISBN: 9780063138797
Harper Business

The Light We Carry: Overcoming in Uncertain Times
By Michelle Obama
ISBN: 9780593237489
Crown

Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?
By Seth Godin
ISBN: 9781591844099
Portfolio

Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die
By Chip and Dan Heath
ISBN: 9780812982008
Random House

Simply Put
By Ben Guttman
ISBN: 9781523004683
Berrett-Koehler

Slide:ology
By Nancy Duarte
ISBN: 9780596522346
O'Reilly Media

Speak with Impact: How to Command the Room and Influence Others
By Allison Shapira
ISBN: 9781400238514
AMACOM

Speaking Up Without Freaking Out
By Matt Abrahams
ISBN: 9781465290472
Kendall Hunt Publishing

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