

Keeping the interest of your audience is the key to successful presentations. Strategies throughout this entertaining book furnish you with immediate help to manage stage fright, craft engaging illustrations, deliver with pizzazz, and keep your audience at attention.

ATTENTION! The Art of Holding Your Audience in the Palm of Your Hand

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# ATTENTION!

The Art of  
Holding Your Audience  
in the Palm of Your Hand

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## Attention: Key Factor in Effective Communication

***If your efforts are sometimes greeted with indifference, don't lose heart. The sun puts on a wonderful show at daybreak, yet most of the people in the audience go on sleeping.***  
~Ada Teixeira

**P**oor attention permeates our culture. Distractions are a common problem and a major culprit is multi-tasking. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, "Multitasking drivers are three times as likely to be involved in an auto crash as more attentive motorists who don't dab on makeup, eat breakfast, or chat on cell phones." Emergency room physicians report a huge increase in face, chin, mouth, and eye injuries due to falls when people text message as they walk.

Routine affects your attention span. Have you ever driven such a familiar route that you arrive at your destination and don't remember how you got there? Frightening, isn't it? Our routine often hinders our attention.

And we humans have a problem paying attention, period. This can be seen in the story about the man who

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asked his friend, "Have you heard the story about the dirty window?"

"No, what is it?"

"Oh, well, you couldn't see through it anyway."

The next day the friend thought he would tell his neighbor the joke. So he asked, "Have you heard the story about the window you couldn't see through?"

"No," replied the neighbor. "How does it go?"

"Oh, well, it's too dirty to tell anyway."

*The single greatest  
secret of success is  
paying attention.*

In our experience, the single greatest secret of success is paying attention. This is especially true in speaking. Anyone's attention span when listening to a presentation is very short. Since a speaker can be sure to lose the listener's attention several times, one of the speaker's main responsibilities is to keep bringing the audience's attention back to the presentation.

The typical length of speeches today is from 20 to 45 minutes. In the Lincoln Douglas debates of 1858, each side spoke for three hours; in the 2008 presidential debates, each candidate was given two minutes to respond to each of nine topics, with a five-minute discussion following each.

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President's Barack Obama's inaugural address was 18 minutes in length, two-thirds as long as President Abraham Lincoln, and even farther removed from President William Henry Harrison's hour and 45 minutes.

Today's pervasive technology--making cell phones almost obsolete and with more gadgets added daily--can create a number of distractions for the listener during a presentation. When Steve first started speaking, his main distraction was an audience member reading a newspaper during his speech!

Today's problems are quite different. During a recent winter semester, a student announced in the middle of Steve's class that classes were dismissed because of the accumulation of snow. Since Steve had received no information from the main office during his lecture, he asked how the student knew: the student's friend had just texted him with the news.

This book focuses on how to develop winning presentations by getting and holding attention. Because we are exposed to so much information and because so many things demand our attention, we have a hard time attending to the important. As Yogi Berra said, "You can observe a lot just by watching." But to accomplish such, you must learn to pay attention.

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To communicate better, you must pay attention to what is going on around you. One of the problems in listening to someone else is faking attention. We look at the person talking and even nod our heads at appropriate times, and yet our minds are somewhere else. How often have you suddenly realized that you have a great deal at stake in what someone is saying to you, yet you've missed some of it while looking at the speaker and appearing to be paying attention?

When conversing with another person, don't check email or respond to a message on your desk. We simply cannot pay attention and do other things without missing important aspects of human relationships. Recently, Steve went into a friend's office to chat for a few minutes. Even though his friend said, "Hello" in a friendly way, he continued to check and even answer his email. It was a short visit.

Apply self-discipline. Tune people in, don't tune people out. Don't make people feel like Jan Brady in "The Brady Bunch Movie" when she asked, "Don't I have a voice? Am I invisible?" If you don't have time to listen, admit it so you aren't rude to the other person. Make an appointment to listen at a later time.

When attending a meeting, volunteer to take notes; that will give you motivation to pay careful attention throughout. If you are going to be there anyway, taking notes will help you to become the best listener possible.



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Listen to others as though you will ask a question about what they have said. Even if you don't ask the question, simply having the mindset for assimilating information to ask follow-up questions will heighten your attention skills.

Remove distractions when possible. Close the door to your office when concentration is critical, and don't answer the phone when people are in your office. Avoid important conversations when you or the person you are talking to is hungry or eager to leave for home. Provide an environment where paying attention is encouraged by circumstances and surroundings.

Learn to concentrate. Pick out an inanimate object or have a pen and paper in readiness before making a phone call. Look at it as you talk so you will not be distracted by people walking by or other noises. Take a moment to think about the topic before the meeting or phone call so you create the mindset to pay attention.

*Today's pervasive technology can create a number of distractions for the listener during a presentation.*

Don't schedule every minute of the day. Have gaps in your appointments so you have time to respond to

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unexpected events that might sap your attention during the next appointment.

To make it easy for people to listen to you, start your conversation by stating what you want to talk about and stay on topic. Don't bring up extraneous materials or go off on a tangent. Show excitement in your tone of voice and have purposeful movement with your body as you speak. Look at the person as you speak. These are simple ways of encouraging people to pay attention to you.

Expand your interests; this will encourage you to give attention to a greater variety of things. Once you learn about something new, you give more attention when that subject matter is discussed or observed. If you have a new baby, you'll be more attentive to young children. If you learn to fish creeks, you will be more aware of streams of water along the highways. Once you see a red-tailed hawk on a fencepost, you'll keep watching for more. Study people to be more aware of how people respond when communicating. You'll be motivated to pay closer attention as you relate to people.

Although this chapter is an overview of attention in communication, this book will center on how to have a winning presentation through getting and holding the attention of the audience. As William James stated, "That which holds attention determines action." Even with great content in your presentation, if you can't get and hold the

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attention of the audience you will fail. Here you have key principles on how to attract and maintain interest. To be attentive in a conversation is one thing, but to be the center of interest of 30 or 1000 listeners is a different matter; that is the scope of this book.

Many of you grew up watching “Mister Rogers Neighborhood.” Fred Rogers was the star and he was a master at paying attention to his audience, even through the television camera. As columnist Jack McKinney wrote, “He didn’t rely on a flashy set or colorful graphics. His secret was his ability to focus gently and completely on whatever person or thing was before him.” Patricia Madson said in *ImprovWisdom*, “Life is attention, and what we are attending to determines to a great extent how we experience the world.” Mr. Rogers helped his young audience to pay attention by giving his complete attention to them.

We want to expand your view of presentation skills so you can pay attention to that next presentation—and be able to hold your audience in the palm of your hand.

## Pay Attention to Humor

***It is a great thing to have a sense of humor. To go through life with no sense of the humorous and ridiculous is like riding a wagon without springs.***

**~Henry Ward Beecher**

**T**hree elderly gentlemen were sitting together on a train out of London. As the train approached a station, the first one said, "This is Wembley."

The second one said, "No, this is Thursday."

The third one replied, "Me, too! Let's stop and get a drink."

This story is a great way to include humor in emphasizing the importance of speaking plainly and listening carefully. You don't have to be a comedian to use humor in a speech.

To add a new dimension to your next presentation, consider the use of humor. Appropriate humor relaxes an audience and can break down barriers so that the audience is more receptive to your ideas. Humor can bring attention to the point you are making, and humor will help the audience better remember your point. As Virginia Tooper says, "When

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the mouth is open for laughter, you may be able to shove in a little food for thought.”

Some speakers resist using humor because they fear no one else will laugh or smile. That’s why an appropriate definition of humor is the *art* of being funny; the goal of the speaker is to choose material that will be enjoyable to the audience, whether they smile, chuckle, or guffaw.

*When possible, choose humor that comes from your own experiences or those friends have shared.*

A good place to begin is to think of an embarrassing moment that happened to you. Usually there is an element of surprise, incongruity, or a contradiction which can be funny since humor often contains these elements. A recent embarrassing moment may hurt too much for you to see the humor, but think of one that occurred several years ago. By now you might be able to see how the story can be funny to someone else. Remember another definition of humor: “Humor is tragedy separated by time and space.”

When Steve played high school basketball, he was the first on the team who was supposed to run through a paper-covered hoop onto the ball floor. As Steve burst through in triumph, he stumbled and slid all the way across the floor. What was mortifying to him was hilarious to everyone else,

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and now he can tell that story and enjoy laughing with his listeners.

Another value of using the embarrassing moment is that you are poking fun at yourself, not a member of the audience. Don't risk picking on someone in the audience, even if everyone laughs. You never know when a statement can hurt someone's feelings or seem inappropriate to an audience. Audience members may become uneasy, fearing that you will pick on them next.

You are wise to start with humor that is short, such as a one-liner. Certainly give credit to the person who said it, and having another source for the humor takes the pressure off you. You can get experience before going on to more risky aspects of humor. When Steve talks about creativity and getting out of your comfort zone, a line he found that works well is "Orville Wright did not have a pilot's license." The same thing can be true of referring to a sitcom punch line you heard. This gives you a chance to practice setting up humor, but again, since the humor did not come from you, you feel little pressure for people to laugh.

Probably the least risky use of humor is a cartoon. (Be sure to secure permission to use it.) The cartoon is separate from you and if people do not laugh, don't feel responsible. But be sure everyone can actually see the cartoon! After a

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pause, always read the caption aloud for the benefit of the visually impaired.

We do not recommend using jokes as your first effort at humor. Sometimes jokes can take away from the depth of your content. Also, with the availability of internet sources and email, jokes are passed around a lot and you risk telling a joke many in the audience have heard. On the other hand, A. P. Herbert said, "There is no reason why a joke should not be appreciated more than once. Imagine how little good music there would be if, for example, a conductor refused to play Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on the grounds that his audience might have heard it before."

*Start with humor that is short, such as a one-liner.*

There are some jokes that we laugh at no matter how often we hear them. Some lines we wish we'd thought of first, such as "If you lend someone \$20 and you never see that person again...it was probably worth it." We can still use them when they fit our topics.

If you can adapt the joke to fit your presentation, then a joke might be fine. You can introduce it with a comment such as, "My situation reminded me of a story you may have

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heard....” and tell the story. By saying “story” and not a “joke,” you won’t be embarrassed if no one laughs.

When you use humor, show that you are enjoying yourself. Smile, look expectant, speak with enthusiasm. Humor does not work well if delivered timidly. To make that work, make sure the humor is funny to you. If you don’t smile or laugh at the cartoon, joke, one-liner, story, pun, anecdote, or top ten list, then you certainly cannot expect an audience to do so. A key to using humor is only to use humor that makes you laugh or smile.

Before using humor in your speech, practice with small groups of people. Do they seem to enjoy the humor? Even if your experimental group does not laugh or smile initially, don’t give up on the humor because the problem might be in the way you are delivering the joke or quip. Watch comedians and notice their timing. Listen to the humor channel on XM radio and match your pacing to the style you hear there.

Steve often uses this line in talking about the importance of listening: “We are geared to a talk society. Someone said, ‘The only reason we listen is so we can talk next.’” When he first tried that line, people did not smile; but he worked on the timing so that he paused and smiled after “listen” and that seemed to work. He was rushing through the punch line and did not give people time to be prepared for the humorous part. Practice helped him to become



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comfortable with that humorous comment. Only use humor in a speech after you are comfortable by memorizing and testing the story, joke, or one-liner.

Never use humor that is in poor taste. Don't use profanity or off-color material. Do not insult a nationality, geographical background, or religious affiliation. Avoid making fun of any physical impairment. In other words, do nothing, even in fun, that would insult or hurt someone. A good rule of thumb is *If you're wondering if certain humor might be offensive, do not use it.*

Pace your humor carefully. Watch your audience for feedback. Do not "step on" your humor if people are chuckling or laughing. Pause and let them enjoy themselves. Continue only when the group has experienced the humor and is getting quiet again. One of the challenges a person faces when using humor for the first time is rushing through the material and failing to pause at appropriate places.

*Never preview by saying, "I'm going to tell you a funny story." Let the audience decide for themselves.*

When possible, choose humor that comes from your own experiences or those friends have shared. You do not have to worry about people having heard the humor before,

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and you will feel more comfortable telling about what happened to you. Find such experiences by looking for a humorous line or situation.

To stress to parenting groups that the punishment should fit the unacceptable behavior, Lanita likes to tell about their son Josh being part of a group that made fun of a classmate. Since Lanita taught at his elementary school, the punishment Lanita and Steve levied was for Josh to eat lunch with the child three times a week for four weeks. She ends with, "Of course I wasn't sure it was the right punishment when his teacher said, "Making Josh sit with that child is cruel and unusual punishment. You are the meanest mother I know!"

For example, Steve was making a bank deposit at a drive-in window. When he asked to make a second deposit, the teller said solemnly, "I'm sorry, sir, but you'll have to go around the bank and drive through a second time to make a second deposit." They both laughed and Steve may have a line to work into a speech.

If you have small children, listen for something they say that might be funny to an audience as well. Art Linkletter made a great living on the notion that "kids say the darnedest things." Mike Cope, a minister in Abilene, Texas, tells about a child in his congregation who memorized the

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Lord's Prayer to say with his parents at home. He ended it by saying, "Please be seated."

Make sure the humor relates to the point you are making. Do not use humor that is simply there to make the audience laugh. The humor should tie in with some aspect of your speech. For example, Steve tells about his experience of getting braces at age 46 and the difficult time he had getting used to the wires and rubber bands in his mouth. After he tells the story, he makes the point that you may have not had the braces problem he had, but we all have challenges in communicating well. We want to look at ways to be more effective in speaking by identifying these challenges and how to overcome them. The audience enjoys the story but also remembers the point that he's making. If you don't tie your humor to your presentation, the audience may like the humor, but will wonder what point you are attempting to make. Or even worse, they may get involved in your story and not even wonder what your point is.

*Make sure the humor  
relates to the point you are  
making.*

Never preview by saying, "I'm going to tell you a funny story." Let the audience decide for themselves. Look pleasant and smile as you launch into your funny line, but if no one

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smiles or laughs then just move on as though you meant for the piece of humor to be serious. This approach takes the pressure off you.

Remember you are not speaking for laughs as Jay Leno and David Letterman are in their nightly monologues. Your goal is simply to enhance your presentation and be more effective in communicating ideas. Go for it! Use humor in your next speech. Audiences enjoy having fun.

Although President Lincoln was known for his humor, Judge Owen T. Reeves said of him: "I heard Lincoln tell hundreds of anecdotes and stories, but never one that was not told to illustrate or give point to some subject or question that had been the theme of conversation, or that was not suggested by an anecdote or story told by someone else."

Look at humor as a tool in improving your speech in the manner of attention devices, smooth transitions, and solid structure. Remember, "A smile is a curve that straightens out a lot of things."

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