

Bad Rules Never Seem to Die - The 5 Worst Ideas in Public Speaking

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I first published this blog post 3 years ago, and I'm sorry to say I still see people following these 5 (bad) rules all the time. Let's stamp them out now! With thanks to Susan Trivers who reminded me of it.

1. **"Tell 'em what you're going to say, say it, and tell 'em what you said."** This old chestnut is still widely believed. It comes from WWII, when the Army worked out a way to ensure that all soldiers got the same marching orders and remembered them. The soldiers that survived the war came back, went into business, and started spreading the word. The problem is that the Army's presentations didn't have to be interesting or engaging. These were soldiers! They were taking orders! *You* do have to be interesting and engage your audiences. So unless you want the people in front of you to be diving for their Blackberries, don't repeat like they did in the Army.

2. **"A good presentation has to have slides. Has to!"** So widespread is the use of Power Point and its clones that there is a widespread belief that you have to use slides to give a presentation and it is always better if you do. In fact, while there are certain kinds of presentations that do benefit from slides, many do not. Keynote speeches should NEVER use slides, unless you've climbed Mount Everest and you've got some amazing summit shots. Can you imagine President Obama using slides during his inaugural address? *Real leaders don't use Power Point.* Slides all too often become a barrier between speaker and audience, not to mention a crutch for the speaker. If your slides are actually speaker notes that you read, mostly, that's a sign that you are horribly misusing slides. Think of slides as illustrations for the audience of points that you're making that can really only be appreciated through pictures (or graphs or pie charts). Everything else is speaker notes, and should not be shown to the audience. Just to anticipate one set of comments, yes, if you're a trainer, and you're speaking for a day, or three, then slides can help.

3. **"A speech is a formal occasion. It's not the same as a conversation. Different rules apply."** This is a tricky one, because it used to be true. When FDR and Churchill strode the earth, a speech was a more formal occasion. Both of those orators began to change the genre by using colloquial language and direct address to the people. Television then accelerated the process. We now expect our leaders, celebrities, and stars to speak to us conversationally, because we've seen them do it for years. As a result, unless speakers do the same, they look and sound ridiculously stiff and pompous. A speech is a conversation with the audience. Get used to it. Enjoy it!

4. **"When I speak, I have to stay behind the podium."** The reasons offered up for this bad advice are various. Sometimes it's the technology - you're speaking at a big conference and you're on those big screens in a live feed, and the tech folks tell you that you have to stay behind the podium so they can keep you on screen. Don't believe it. Unless the camera guy is asleep, he can follow you as you move around the stage, and even into the audience. He might prefer to snooze away at his camera, but he's being paid to stay awake, so make use of all his talents, including his ability to hold a giant cup of

coffee and follow you at the same time. Other reasons include fear, nervousness, and sheer terror. Oh, and also that your notes, or the button to advance the slides, are on the podium. I've got four words for you: *Be brave. Use wireless.*

5. "We have to save the last 15 minutes of the speech slot for Q 'n A." This is just a habit, and not a particularly good one. For one thing, if you close with Q 'n A, it means that the last thing your audience hears from you is the answer to the last question that is asked. This may or may not be a good place to end. Often the last question is one from a crank who has been working up the courage to ask you if you wear boxers or briefs. So instead, save 5 minutes of your remarks for the end, and take your Q 'n A just before that. Or, if you know your speech well, and are good at fielding questions, take them throughout. That's the more spontaneous and engaging way to do it, but it takes practice to stay on message and not get distracted too much by the questions. For some people, it's better to take Q 'n A for most of the presentation, because the speaker is more comfortable that way, after a brief set of opening comments (and a closing at the end.) This is the format of most presidential news conferences, for example.