



FROM MONOLOGUE TO DIALOGUE:

ADDING INTERACTION TO YOUR PRESENTATIONS

Mustering the courage to present confidently in front of others is hard enough, but when it comes to actually engaging an audience and managing their participation, nervous and novice presenters either usually freak out, forget to add interaction, or both. And there's another, lesser-known but equally important issue: **Audiences can struggle with interactions in presentations, too**, feeling uncomfortable participating and not knowing what is expected of them. Why must engaging with your audience be so difficult?

I believe it doesn't have to be, as long as the presenter effectively invites his or her audience to participate.

Q&A sessions, polls, and other participation opportunities you afford your audience are an abrupt transition from monologue to dialogue, from presentation to facilitation. Making this quick switch to interactivity creates a more equal balance of status and power, which can be a challenge for the audience and speaker alike—but it's necessary if you want to have engaging and memorable presentations online or in-person.

Your audience needs you to lead them through this transition. They expect **you** to command the room and help them to participate. You're the session leader. And there are simple actions you as a presenter can take to navigate smoothly into and through your audience participation activities to get the engagement you want. This ebook will illuminate these participation best practices.

THESE ACTIONS CAN BE DISTILLED INTO THREE BROAD CATEGORIES:



1. Managing your anxiety prior to speaking, so that you will be calm and confident when it's time to engage your audience.



2. Employing presentation best practices, to prepare your audience for interactive participation.



3. Facilitating the participation while it's happening, such as how you call for and answer questions.

No matter whether you are presenting in a virtual or in-person environment, your presentations will benefit from audience participation and interaction.



1. MANAGING YOUR ANXIETY

My experience in listening to thousands of presentations as a communication professor and coach has taught me that having an engaged audience often reduces speaking anxiety because you are working with your audience, rather than being judged by them. The best way to foster this environment with your audience is to reframe the speaking situation in your own mind, before you ever set foot on stage.

There are three ways to reduce your nervousness through simple cognitive action. The first involves reframing the physical, emotional, and mental anxiety you experience prior to speaking as typical and natural. After all, these sensations do not show anything beyond your body's normal response to something that is potentially threatening. Avoid giving these natural responses special significance. Or, even better, you can greet these reactions by saying to yourself: **"Here are those anxiety feelings again. It makes sense that I feel nervous; I am about to speak in front of people."**

This type of acknowledgement is an empowering acceptance that dampens your anxiety, rather than allowing it to make you even more stressed.

Another reframing effort involves seeing a presentation as a conversation, rather than a performance. In performing, you place a tremendous amount of pressure on yourself "to get it right." But a **conversation feels less stressful, and more engaging.** How do you reframe presenting as conversational? First, when you practice, don't stand up and deliver in front of a mirror or camera. Practice by sitting at a coffee table or at a coffee shop with friends or family to talk through your speech. Second, include the word **"you"** frequently when speaking. **"You"** provides a direct, verbal connection with your audience and leads to a more conversational tone and approach. You can also use audience members' names, if you know them, since you connect with people through using their names when you converse.

The final reframing technique changes the relationship you envision having with your audience. You will likely start preparing a presentation by thinking “here’s what I need to tell my audience,” and then proceed to develop and ultimately deliver your thoughts and ideas. A better, more thorough approach to your presentation is to begin by asking the question: **“What does my audience need to hear?”** This may sound similar to “here’s what I need to tell my audience,” but actually the difference is striking. By embracing an audience-focused approach you will not only engage your audience more, since you’re focused on giving them what they need, but you will also take the spotlight – and stress – off of yourself.



2. EMPLOYING PRESENTATION BEST PRACTICES

Passivity is the enemy of participation. If you fail to invite audience participation early and often, inertia sets in and your audience will likely be less motivated to engage. To avoid this situation, I strongly recommend using what I call **Audience Connecting Techniques (ACTs)**. ACTs make audience members sit forward in their chairs engaged, rather than passively leaning back. They demand involvement.

One easy ACT is to **ask your audience to participate**. For example, “With a show of hands, how many of you have...” Requests like this show your audience that they are involved in your presentation.

Another useful ACT is to ask your audience to **visualize a situation** or outcome. For example, “What if” and “Imagine” statements really get your audience involved mentally. Another example might be: “Which side of my slide best represents your experience?” The bottom line is when your audience is seeing something in their mind’s eye, rather than just listening to you describe it, they become more engaged, and your point becomes more vivid and lasting for them.

Possibly the most important ACT is to focus on the relevance of your

topic for your audience. For example, "This point about customer feedback is especially important for online retailers, because of your starred reviews." Helping your audience to see the value of your topic to them is critical to engaging them. Be sure to spend time detailing the specific links between your topic and your audience's lives. Relevancy is the best antidote for apathy, and it brings with it a high level of participation.

Finally, **analogies** can help you explain complex ideas by comparing new information to something your audience is already familiar with. Analogies activate the audience's existing mental constructs, which allows for quicker information processing, better understanding, and greater interest in the topic being presented.

When you use Audience Connecting Techniques throughout your presentation, you reap benefits beyond serving notice to your audience that they are expected to be involved and participate:

- a. Your audience feels more connected to your content,
- b. They see themselves as your partner in the presentation, and
- c. You will feel less anxious because you and your audience are actively working together.



3. FACILLITATING PARTICIPATION WHILE IT'S HAPPENING

Once you have your audience prepared, practiced, and even eager to participate because they feel connected to you and your topic, you need to facilitate the interaction smoothly to continue their willingness to be involved and maximize the benefit. While there are many participative activities that can be employed during a presentation – such as brainstorming, decision-making, polling – the most prevalent one is the Q&A session.

To facilitate an effective Q&A session online or in-person, you first

need to consider when to take questions from your audience. If you are a nervous speaker, my advice is to take your questions at the end of your presentation. This compartmentalization allows you to stay focused on the task at hand – whether presenting or answering questions – without concern for switching back and forth. If you are a more seasoned speaker, or have content that is very complex, you should consider taking questions throughout your presentation at designated times that you announce to your audience at the beginning of your presentation.

When it comes time to ask your audience for their questions, you need to solicit their queries in a way that maintains your credibility and authority while being humble, open, and responsive. This transition to an actual conversation with your audience can be tricky, but it can be made easier by the expectations you establish when you call for questions.

Too often, presenters open Q&A sessions with generic invitations like “Are there any questions?” But broad, limitless invitations make it difficult for audience members to come up with focused, concrete questions. Instead, **try setting parameters and asking for the exact type of questions that you desire to answer.** For example, “I would like to spend 5 to 10 minutes answering questions about the solution that I provided.” This more restrictive opening establishes you as being in control, helps your audience know what types of questions to ask, and leads to questions that you are prepared to answer.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THAT THERE IS ANXIETY INVOLVED IN THE Q&A SESSION NOT JUST FOR YOU, BUT FOR THE AUDIENCE, TOO.

While you have had a chance to warm up and become comfortable speaking in your environment, audience members have not have that advantage. Further, they may be facing several additional pressures: fear that their questions may make them look foolish, sensitivity to power dynamics (e.g., the boss being present) or societal norms (e.g., it is disrespectful to question a distinguished speaker), and, finally, reluctance to put you on the spot and make you look bad. Unfortunately, as a presenter who

desires good, interactive questions, you must take on the added burden of helping your audience get their questions to you.

When answering questions, start your answer by paraphrasing the question asked. This confers several benefits to you:

1. You validate and reward the asker, which will likely encourage more participation – although avoid saying “good question” to every query, which when overused begins to sound insincere.
2. It ensures you will answer the correct question.
3. If you can paraphrase and also think of an answer at the same time, you buy yourself a little preparation time.
4. Finally, you can use this technique to reframe an emotional or challenging question so it's better suited for you: For example, a question such as, “Your pricing is ridiculously expensive...how do you get away with charging so much?” can be rephrased as “You are asking about our product's value...”

In terms of your delivery, remember to address your answer to the entire audience and give your answers in the same speaking style – cadence, vocal variation, etc. – as you used during your presentation. You want to avoid seeming like a different speaker. And when presenting online, do your Q&A with video conferencing. This allows your non-verbal communication to engage your audience, plus being able to see a speaker increases audience trust and familiarity, leading to better conversation.

TO HELP YOUR AUDIENCE UNDERSTAND YOUR ANSWERS, INVOKE THE A.D.D. METHOD OF ANSWERING QUESTIONS:

- Answer the question (in one clear, declarative sentence).
- Detail a specific, concrete example that supports your answer.
- Describe the benefits that explain why your answer is relevant to the asker.

Further, to keep your audience connected, when delivering your answer link their questions to what you previously said and/or questions other audience members have asked. This facilitation tool of linking ideas and concepts helps your audience stay on topic and rewards their contributions by including them. For even greater connection in online presentations, consider sending through the chat panel links to articles related to the Q&A topics discussed.

All of these verbal and nonverbal facilitation techniques will not only encourage participation from your audience, but will also sustain it.

TIME TO START THE CONVERSATION

Audience engagement and participation serve as a hallmark of a compelling speaker, but facilitating this type of experience can feel daunting. However, there are simple ways to address your anxiety, prepare your audience to participate, and then facilitate their participation with ease. Employ these techniques, and you can confidently transition from monologue to dialogue and deliver interactive presentations that you will enjoy and your audience will remember.

ABOUT MATT ABRAHAMS

Matt Abrahams is a passionate, collaborative and innovative educator and coach who teaches Strategic Communication for Stanford University's Graduate School of Business. Matt recently published the second edition of *Speaking Up Without Freaking Out*, a book written to help the millions of people who want to be more confident when speaking in public. He curates a web site called NoFreakingSpeaking.com.

Matt is also Co-Founder of Bold Echo Communication Solutions, a presentation and communication skills company that helps people improve their presentation skills. Matt has worked with executives to help prepare and present keynote addresses and IPO road shows, conduct media interviews, and deliver TED talks.