

Using Acting Techniques to Create a Successful Presentation

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ABSTRACT

When you make a presentation at a User's Group conference or to any group anywhere, it is important to find the best way to communicate your information. A paper presents your ideas in writing, but a presentation is always a performance. The best performers are actors and they know many techniques for creating an effective performance. This paper will discuss a few of those techniques that can be adopted to make your technical presentation an interesting and enlightening performance. The corresponding presentation will, of course, be far more dramatic!

INTRODUCTION

Modern realistic acting was first recognized and documented by the great acting teacher and director Constantin Stanislavski. His methods were modified and modernized by many different schools of acting but they all share some basic techniques that will work for all types of performances including our own technical ones. We will consider them in relation to the content, the materials, and the style of a SAS presentation. The techniques include:

Content

- Preparing the role
- The objective
- Organization

Materials

- Using props
- Using examples

Style

- Appearance
- Body Language
- Voice
- Delivery
- Pace
- Focus
- Humor
- Relaxation

CONTENT

Preparing the role

Stanislavski's most famous analysis of the acting process is called "An Actor Prepares". Preparation is the most important step in doing a presentation. You cannot just copy your paper to Powerpoint slides and come in to the room and speak. You must consider the presentation and accompanying notes as an additional document to the paper itself. It is another medium and needs a different approach and concentrated thought.

The objective

Stanislavski described the “through-line of the play”. This is the main theme that runs through the performance. Reinforce the main theme of your paper, be it a tutorial or an application description. The theme gives the paper and the presentation organization and consistency.

Organization

Even though acting may seem spontaneous, a good performance is really very organized and well planned. Stanislavski said to “Start at the top of the scene”. Every performance must have a clear beginning, middle, and an end. Show the audience what will be covered, follow the outline, and then summarize at the end. We want them to know where we are going and to follow us. The best approach is to use the traditional teaching technique:

Tell them what you are going to tell them.
Tell them.
Tell them what you told them.

MATERIALS

Using props

Most actors use props to enhance their performance. We have Powerpoint slides to assist us in communicating our message. Use your slides in the following ways:

- First slide – Show the title of the talk and your name.
- Next slide – Show the outline – Tell them what you are going to tell them.
- Content
 - The slides are your cues to speak from.
 - Use important words or phrases. Do not use long sentences.
 - Don't be a ham! The slides are there to communicate a message, not to show how much you know about Powerpoint. Too many fancy slides would be overacting.
- Layout
 - Use a header relating to your outline.
 - Present one thought or several bullet items.
 - Use lots of blank space. Don't fill the slide with too many words. The audience is there to listen to you, not to read.
- Appearance
 - Use dark letters on a light background (e.g. black on white, blue on white) or
 - Use light letters on a dark background (e.g. white on blue, yellow on blue)
 - Don't use fancy wallpaper on the background. It is too busy and makes it hard to see the text.
 - Highlight important words.
 - Separate code from text.
- Next to last slide – Summarize the message – Tell them what you told them.
- Last slide – Provide your contact information.

Using examples

The best way to communicate a concept is to show an example. Use examples as much as possible in your presentation. State the idea and then show how it is used. You can often make your slide the example and then just talk about it in the presentation. Because of space limitations, there are no examples of slides included in this paper. But the presentation will include examples and that, after all, is what this is all about.

STYLE

Appearance

An actor's costume defines his character and influences his performance.

- Wear appropriate business attire. It shows respect for your audience and that you take your role as a presenter seriously.
- Wear something comfortable. If you are uncomfortable or have to keep adjusting things, it will be distracting to both you and your audience.
- Do not wear bold colors or busy patterns. They are also distracting.

Body language

Actors go through extensive physical training to learn how to use movement to communicate thoughts and emotions. Serious actors say their body is their instrument. Body language telegraphs mood and intent.

- Stand up straight. Do not sit.
- Don't hide behind the podium. Let the audience see you. Move.
- Face and speak to the audience.
- If you refer to the big screen, don't turn your body. Use the laser pointer and face the room when you speak.
- Don't talk to the laptop. It's not listening.
- Don't look at one person or at one spot. Look around at different parts of the audience.

Voice

When Sir John Gielgud was asked what it takes to play tragedy his response was, "Voice, Voice, VOICE!!!" Actors train their voices for breathing, resonance, pitch, range, volume, and articulation. The greatest actors are those with the great voices: John Gielgud, Richard Burton, Derek Jacobi, Judi Dench, Kenneth Branagh, Patrick Stewart. It is no coincidence that they are all British Shakespearean actors. They do more voice training than any other group. Try to achieve the following:

- Project - Talk to the last row in the room.
- Eliminate vocal fillers (e.g. UH, WELL, OK, NOW)
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Don't ramble on. Say what you have to say and then stop.

Delivery

In order to communicate your message clearly, you must deliver your lines using the right tone, pace and attitude. Actors use pauses and a heightened theatricality to communicate. But you must always appear natural. Lee Strasburg, the founder of the Actors' Studio in New York said, "What an actor has to do is be personal in public".

You would never want to watch an actor perform while he is holding on to his script and reading the lines, would you? You too should never refer to written notes when presenting. You should not memorize your paper but know your subject cold and be able to speak using only your slides as your notes. You must be able to speak naturally and easily about your subject. Your audience did not come to watch you read. Actors call this being "off-book". All dedicated performers learn their lines as fast as possible so that they can communicate more directly with the audience.

Pace

Timing is everything. You will have an allotted time and your presentation must fill that time. Rehearsal is important to ensure that your timing is correct.

Focus

Actors talk about being "in the moment". That means that they are entirely focused on the performance and completely committed to the subject. A good presenter will concentrate totally on the presentation. S/he will show energy and enthusiasm for the subject.

Humor

Humor has its place and can provide variety and enjoyment to the presentation. It should be fun, after all. But be sure it is appropriate, tasteful, relevant, and contributes to your "through-line", your main theme. Remember the great comedian's line, "Dying is easy, comedy is hard." If you cannot use humor naturally and comfortably, then leave it out.

Relaxation

And last but not least ... RELAX. Actors use relaxation techniques more than any other acting exercise. These include breathing, centering, physical exercises, vocal exercises, warm-ups, listening to music. We can do the same. The Speaker Ready-Room is one option you have to warm-up, rehearse and prepare. Use whatever technique works for you personally, but do find a way to consciously relax for your presentation. A relaxed presenter will have more impact and communicate more effectively than any other.

CONCLUSION

Break a Leg!

CONTACT INFORMATION

I'll be here 'til Tuesday, folks!

The author performs only at SAS user group meetings. Her work in the theater is done solely backstage. You can meet her at the stage door after the performance or write fan mail to

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