

Dynamic Dozen

MESSAGE

Tips from top presenters from the American Evaluation Association

This study consisted of interviews with a dozen of the top AEA presenters to get their secrets about how to make and deliver great presentations. Their comments were grouped into three stages of presenting: message, design, and delivery. This report focuses solely on Message, that is, the mindful planning of a structured presentation. While the context for their talks spanned long and short presentations, and included different types of audiences and purposes, their insights can be used or modified by evaluators for their own presentations at the AEA annual conference and elsewhere. Moreover, their suggestions may not be suited for the comfort level of all presenters. Take what you can and apply it to your own context to make your presentations more potent.

Preparing a presentation takes time, with the majority of it being spent in the message stage. Our Dynamic Dozen identified these factors to consider when crafting a presentation message: tailoring the presentation, outlining key points, knowing the content well, creating notes, infusing stories and humor, and planning activities to engage your audience.

TAILOR THE PRESENTATION FOR THE AUDIENCE

When preparing a presentation, our Dynamic Dozen began by taking into account their audience. How did they tailor their presentations for their audience?

1. **Consult with the client or host.** They worked with the presentation host or client to understand the key objectives of their talk as a way to meet the goals of both the client and potential audience members. For example, one of the Dynamic Dozen shared a story about a conference presentation he recently created. He had shared this presentation with the conference host via email and after reviewing it the host identified a connection between the presenter's work and the conference that had been overlooked. Because of this consultation with the presenters he was able to edit and create a presentation that would better serve the audience.



PRO TIP

USE EXAMPLES RELATED TO THE AUDIENCE'S FIELD TO MAKE THE PRESENTATION MORE MEANINGFUL AND IMPACTFUL.



PRO TIP

BUILD A PRESENTATION FOR AN ARRAY OF EXPERIENCES UNTIL YOU CAN ASSESS THE EXPERTISE OF THE AUDIENCE.

2. **Contact audience members.** One of the Dynamic Dozen often contacted potential audience members prior to the presentation, either by phone or email, to survey them about their needs. Another expert assigned homework before the presentation to engage audience members and help them prepare. Although this may not be feasible for AEA conference presentations, it may be reasonable in other scenarios.
3. **Prepare based on context.** They tailored the presentation to the expertise of the audience. For example, one of the Dynamic Dozen reported, "if I'm talking with a bunch of public health nurses then I will use examples related to their field." Catering to the audience helps to create a presentation that is relevant and meaningful. This means nearly every presentation will need some editing before it is presented again in order to address the audience's context.
4. **Prepare for an array of experience and knowledge about the topic.** Although you may not always know the audience expertise level in advance, it is important to "pitch it at the right level." Some of the Dynamic Dozen said they aimed a presentation at a level slightly above beginner, but also included activities to engage all levels, until they could assess the audience's experience and expertise during the beginning of the presentation. See the Delivery report for more about how to assess the audience.

OUTLINE THE PRESENTATION AROUND KEY POINTS

Before designing slide visuals, the Dynamic Dozen began by identifying the primary messages they wanted the audience to walk away with and then they outlined the key presentation points. As one expert reported, "I think what causes people problems is they are trying to figure out what they want to say as they are creating the presentation. You have to first create the key points and then figure out what you want to say."

Here is how they went about this process:

1. **Working backwards.** Using the established key points, the presenters worked backwards to fill in the supporting content that would guide the audience in making the necessary connections from point to point.
2. **Repeating key points.** In order to grasp the content, audience members need to hear key points repeatedly. One expert set up the flow of the presentation such that it started with outline of the key points; included detail on each one through lecture, discussion, and activities; and finished with a summary of those same key points. Another reported, "Tell them what you were going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them again."

KNOW THE CONTENT WELL

Nearly all of our Dynamic Dozen said knowing the content well was an essential part of giving a good presentation. When recalling times when presentations didn't go well, including their own experiences sitting through bad presentations, they reported that not knowing the content well was the most contributing factor. In addition to being wise and experienced, our Dynamic Dozen also used these strategies to prepare their message:

1. **Anticipate audience questions.** In addition to tailoring the presentation to the audience, they put themselves in the audience while they were developing their lecture notes and asked, "What questions would I have if I were an audience member?" They reported that anticipating audience needs will help focus the presentation and help the presenter prepare the appropriate content.
2. **Prepare bonus content.** Several of the Dynamic Dozen suggested preparing extra content, especially for inexperienced presenters who have the potential to get flustered and move quickly during the presentation. Having extra content available could come in handy if the presentation runs short but could also provide material to help answer audience questions. It shouldn't be considered mandatory content that must be covered.



PRO TIP

USE NOTES WHEN TIMING IS CRITICAL OR WHEN TALKING ABOUT A CONTENTIOUS ISSUE TO HELP ENSURE WHAT'S BEING SAID IS ACCURATE.

CREATE NOTES

At some point in their career, all of the Dynamic Dozen used notes to help guide their presentation and keep them on message. For some, notes highlighted key points, while for others notes involved a verbatim transcript of the presentation. One of the Dynamic Dozen used handwritten paper notecards to support presentation delivery saying "I use the notecards as the bullet points I refuse to put in my slides."

INFUSE STORIES AND HUMOR

Nearly all presenters discussed using humor, stories, or both in their presentations as a way to illustrate the message. Stories and humor also increased the connection and engagement with the audience. How did our Dynamic Dozen use stories and humor in their presentations?

1. **Stories**
 - a. **Current events.** One of the Dynamic Dozen often deepened the message by introducing and drawing connections to current news. For example, when trying to make a point about the use of language, he used a story from that morning's paper about the reclassification

of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder from a syndrome to an injury. This example called on a current event to demonstrate how a simple change in language could impact perception, a topic in his talk, thus making the discussion more relatable and digestible for the audience.

- b. **Personal experiences.** Both presenters' and audience members' personal experiences were used to make the necessary connections between key points.
 - i. One of the Dynamic Dozen said, "I tell real stories. For example I might ask 'Has anyone ever done this? Okay please share a little bit about your experience.'" This provides an opportunity for everyone to acknowledge similarities and/or differences while learning from each other.
 - ii. Several presenters told personal stories of times when things had gone wrong to illustrate their point.

2. Humor

- a. **Jokes and cartoons.** Some of the Dynamic Dozen described themselves as "naturally funny" and used jokes and cartoons to break the ice and get the audience involved in the presentation. For example, one reported using "a flow chart I created for my wedding. Some people may laugh, some people may not. No loss. It doesn't matter if they laugh. I use it to make a point."
- b. **Irony and self-deprecating humor.** Several of the Dynamic Dozen used irony and self-deprecating humor thoughtfully; they viewed it as a less offensive form of humor and always targeted it at themselves or more globally – never at the audience.
 - i. One presenter reported sometimes laughing off a lengthy introduction by saying "...oh I could never live up to that introduction."
 - ii. As a way to laugh about mistakes one of the Dynamic Dozen said, "I use funny anecdotes. Usually they are about me and about something that I have done wrong."
 - iii. One presenter used humor to handle a dry topic. "You know when people see a presentation with economics in the title they automatically think 'boring' so I always try to lighten the mood immediately by starting off with a joke" about how many people came even though economics was in the title.

PLAN ACTIVITIES TO ENGAGE YOUR AUDIENCE

Our Dynamic Dozen planned activities to engage the audience for two key reasons. First, the audience is likely a composite of auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners and activities were seen as a way to engage those who don't learn as well from lecture. Secondly, presenters believed people learn better when engaged with the content. What kind of activities did our Dynamic Dozen plan?

1. **Gallery walk.** Audience members worked out problems or answered questions on large post-it notes placed on walls around the room. Once the projects were complete, the audience walked around together as a group and discussed the work.
2. **Group work.** This included working in pairs or with an entire table to discuss a given topic or question and then sharing the highlights with their table or the rest of the audience.
3. **Hands-on activities.** Audience members were asked to work out problems at their table and then a designated member from each table would come to the front and input the data into an Excel spreadsheet. The presenter could then demonstrate, in real time, how to graph and manipulate data.
4. **Live reference page.** One presenter used a Word document to capture references as they were discussed during the presentation, which was then emailed directly to audience members or photographed using camera phones.
5. **Use activities, even in a 15 minute presentation.** If you have a short presentation you can still build in activities. Ask audience members to raise their hand to show consensus about a question, do a 30 second pair-share, or use a scenario-based example to engage in a discussion and help the audience retain the message.



PRO TIP

PLAN TO INCORPORATE AN ACTIVITY EVERY 10-20 MINUTES FOR THE DURATION OF THE PRESENTATION TO CAPTURE AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT.

Further Resources

Ready to prepare your message? Check out these other resources compiled from AEA members.

WATCH

Dan Roam's [Be Double Minded](#) video – Here is your license to use simple visual sketches in planning your message.

Gavin McMahon's webinar, [Finding Your POWERful Point](#) – This webinar talks about multiple ways to craft a message. Watch, then take the [test](#) to find out your presenter type and learn specific ways you can improve.

READ

[FrameWorks Institute](#) – Though this is a for-profit company with limited free resources, they make a good point: Knowing how the audience thinks about your issue is critical to connecting with them.

Jane Davidson's article, [Unlearning Some of our Social Scientist Habits](#) – Perhaps the quintessential evaluation article asking us to rethink how we shape our messages.

Chip and Dan Heath's book, [Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die](#) – Excellent insight into how people think so that a presenter can reach them.

Dan Roam's book, [Blah, Blah, Blah: What to do When Words Don't Work](#) – Even more on visual thinking to connect your message's dots.

George Posner and Alan Rudnitsky's book, [Course Design: A Guide to Curriculum Development for Teachers](#) – This text was recommended by one of the Dynamic Dozen as a resource for creating their presentations, which are a lot like curriculum.

Susan Jones' book, [Backstage Pass for Trainers, Facilitators, and Public Speakers: Your Guide to Successful Presentations](#) – This book was given out as a prize during the Data Visualization and Reporting Topical Interest Group's business meeting.

Brian Miller's book, [More Quick Team-Building Activities for Busy Managers](#) – In search of great activities for your presentation? This book includes 50 ideas for team activities, many of which can be adapted to use in conference presentations.

DOWNLOAD

Kylie Hutchinson's [25 Tips for Better Presentations](#) – This handout, accessible after a free sign-up, contains tips for all aspects of presentations including structuring a message.

About the Dynamic Dozen

We interviewed 12 evaluators from 3 different countries, including: Canada, Australia, and the United States. Here are the Dynamic Dozen:

[Gail Barrington](#)

[Jean King](#)

[Tom Chapel](#)

[Susan Kistler](#)

[Phaedra Corso](#)

[Michael Quinn Patton](#)

[David Devlin-Foltz](#)

[Patricia Rogers](#)

[David Fetterman](#)

[Jeff Wasbes](#)

[Robert Kahle](#)

[Rebecca Woodland](#)

On average the experts have been presenting more than 25 years and present more than 20 times each year. They reported currently spending about half as much time preparing for presentations as when they first started presenting. When asked if they had studied the art of presenting, half of them said they had reflected on their own presentations, observed other presenters, read books, or taken classes. We asked the dynamic dozen to identify another presenter they admired. They identified:

[Steve Jobs](#)

[George Carlin](#)

[Dick Hardt](#)

[Hans Rosling](#)

[Mike Morris](#)

[Hetty Roessingh](#)

[Andy Papachristos](#)

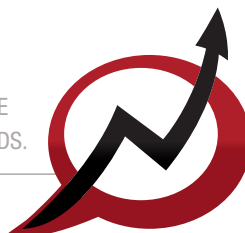
[Malcolm Gladwell](#)

[Andy Goodman](#)

[Michael Quinn Patton](#)

[Larry Lessig](#)

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ABOUT THE STUDY METHODS.



About Us

The [American Evaluation Association](#) is an international professional association of evaluators devoted to the application and exploration of program evaluation, personnel evaluation, technology, and many other forms of evaluation. Evaluation involves assessing the strengths and weaknesses of programs, policies, personnel, products, and organizations to improve their effectiveness. AEA has approximately 7300 members representing all 50 states in the US as well as over 60 foreign countries.

The American Evaluation Association commissioned this study as part of the [Potent Presentation Initiative](#) (p2i). p2i is designed to help AEA members improve their presentation skills on at the AEA annual conference and beyond through professional development around presentation message, design, and delivery. Based on audience ratings from past AEA presentations, we identified the top 12 presenters to interview them about their strategies around message, design, and delivery. Their advice can help both budding and seasoned presenters develop and refine their presentation skills and efforts.

This report was prepared by Anjanette Raber under contract with the American Evaluation Association.



Figure 1. A *Wordle*, or word cloud, visually describing the skills and characteristics of the admired presenters. Humor, stories, visuals, and connections were repeating themes among presentations skills that were admired.