

The Five-Minute Rule for Presentations

By Jacqueline J. Schmidt and Joseph B. Miller

Most of us have been in a similar situation: It's 4 on a Friday afternoon, and Susan is getting ready to leave for the weekend when John, a manager from another division, calls. He wants Susan to speak to his department about the training changes she has made in her work group. He has a meeting in 10 days and has allotted 15 minutes for her presentation. Susan reluctantly agrees, but in the 10 days before her talk, she wastes valuable time worrying.

In more than 25 years of giving presentation workshops, we've found that for many speakers like Susan, the problem isn't the actual speech; it's a lack of knowledge about how to control, plan, and organize. Because speakers and trainers are often unsure of how much they need to present or how to plan, they feel a lack of control. And that causes fear. To gain control of the material, reduce fear, and improve your presentations, try the "five-minute rule."

The five-minute rule requires a speaker to think of a complete presentation as a series of five-minute talks, each developing one idea. An idea can be general (such as change, as in Susan's group) or specific (such as one of the 10 training changes Susan made in her group). Instead of planning a 15-minute presentation, the speaker plans three five-minute talks, each complete with an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

Thinking of a presentation as a series of five-minute talks quickly helps organize it and avoids the problem Susan had—not knowing how much time she needed. When John called and said that he'd given her 15 minutes on his meeting schedule, she should have immediately realized that, at most, she could cover three points. While they were on the phone, they could have agreed which three points. If John wanted more, Susan could have estimated how much additional time she'd need. Because each five-minute talk covers only one idea, you can determine how much detail to include. If a substantial amount is required, add sub-points, each another five-minute segment.

The five-minute rule helps speakers

limit ideas to those that are important to the audience. In determining which ideas to include, ask yourself *What does the audience need to know?* instead of *What's important?* If you've been working on a project for several months, everything about it seems important. But remember that the audience doesn't need to know everything. Narrow the ideas to relevant ones, and try not to include any unnecessary details.

The five-minute rule gives you flexibility for unexpected problems. For instance, if your planned half-hour talk is suddenly shortened to 15 minutes due to extenuating circumstances, don't try to condense it by dropping data and points; that can cause you to lose the audience. Instead, choose which three talks of the prepared six the audience needs most, and present those. The result is a clearly organized, controlled presentation, even in a hectic situation.

Here are a few more suggestions: Introduce each five-minute talk. Speakers often use an introduction, followed by a series of points and evidence. But research shows that people typically have limited attention and can lose interest in a listing of points. By treating each idea as a separate talk, you renew and focus the audience's attention each time you introduce a new idea. The introduction of each idea should highlight three elements: what you'll discuss, why it's important to the audience, and your credibility.

First, the introduction should identify what's being discussed and how it will be explained. For example, if you're asked to talk about a change in the training manual, state whether the change will be covered broadly or in detail. We've found that, without an overview, audiences frequently fill in the speaker's purpose incorrectly. As a result, they have trouble understanding the speaker's point: Instead of listening, they're waiting for the purpose they inferred. Alerting the audience to what's coming lets them know how to listen and how to relate the idea to previous knowledge.

Second, explain briefly why the topic is important to the audience. That gives them a reason to listen, which may not be the same as your reason for speaking. Ask yourself why they should invest time listening. The introduction is one of the

most difficult parts of a talk to develop because it forces you to think from the audience's perspective.

Third, depending on the situation, the introduction should establish your credibility, which doesn't necessarily have to be reestablished in every five-minute segment. But it might be important if you're presenting an idea the audience may not like or if you're unknown to them. You establish trust by demonstrating some commonality between yourself and the audience.

For example, if the audience is likely not to like the changes in the training manual, say (if true) that you didn't like the changes at first, but found by using them that they work. If that's not true, acknowledge that the audience might not be excited about the changes, and ask them to suspend judgment until the end of the presentation.

If you're unknown to the audience, relate your experience in the area. For example, mention that you've been working with the new guidelines for several months, or that you've spent time on a committee developing and researching the guidelines.

That two- or three-part orientation should take about one minute of the five-minute talk. Plan it right when you're asked to give a presentation, by asking the inviter what issues he or she wants you to address, why the issues are important to the audience, and what the audience knows about you, so that you know how much credibility you must establish.

Conclude each five-minute talk. Speakers often don't conclude each idea, but instead assume that the audience understands the point, and save the conclusion until the end. But even when a speaker is dynamic, the number of audience members who draw the wrong conclusion can be high. Take time at the end of each idea to wrap up what has been said.

Further, always tell the audience how to interpret the conclusion. That's critical. Don't just close your presentation by stating that the new training program, which had taken four months to implement, resulted in a budgeted cost reduction of 3 percent, and assume your audience will think that was an excellent result. The accountants in the audience could think that

when all the energy, downtime, and costs were considered, the results should have been much higher. Trainers in the audience might think that such changes are made all of the time and usually show no immediate cost reduction. You need to explain to the entire audience how significant the 3 percent gain was. Without that interpretation, you run the risk that the audience will draw an incorrect conclusion. Plan to change the delivery. You can also use the five-minute rule to plan your delivery. Two important aspects of delivery are the speaker's movement and changes in voice rate and volume. An audience can listen intently for very short periods. You need to renew their attention by changing the delivery aspects regularly.

In developing the idea in each five-minute talk, include an abstract description and a concrete example. When you move from the discussion of the abstract idea to the concrete example or vice versa, you'll alter your rate of speech almost automatically, because speech reflects the thinking process. When people are presenting abstract theory, the rate of speak-

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ing slows because that requires thinking and choosing words. When recalling an example or illustration, speakers tend to speed up because remembering generally takes less effort and time than creating.

You get movement by using several visual aids. You have to move to get to them, hand them out, point to them, or write something. Change the type and use of visuals with each five-minute talk. As your visuals change, movement will automatically result.

Just as the five-minute rule can lessen a speaker's anxiety and frustration—and heighten audience understanding—so do planned changes. The change from abstract description to concrete example is important because it reflects how people learn.

Learning requires moving up and down the ladder of abstraction from general ideas to specific examples. Some people are inductive learners (they learn best by progressing from specific to general); others are deductive (from general to specific). Going from abstract to specific lets both types of learners understand. Visual aids reinforce ideas by exposing the audience to more than one learning modality, thus increasing their understanding. Movement can help relieve the anxiety of public speaking.

The five-minute rule will change the way you prepare and organize your presentations and help you take control. It can also help you structure complicated material into a series of key ideas based on audience needs. And it can help you plan a more effective delivery.

Armed with the five-minute rule, neither Susan nor you should fear picking up the phone.

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