

that a comparison of apples and oranges is impossible. At first glance, some papers seemed to have addressed the important topic of a real comparison of apples and oranges. Table 3 reveals the truth.

This article, certain to become the classic in the field, clearly demonstrates that apples and oranges are not only comparable; indeed they are quite similar. The admonition "Let's not compare apples with oranges" should be replaced immediately with a more appropriate expression such as "Let's not compare walnuts with elephants" or "Let's not compare tumour necrosis factor with linguini."

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How not to give a presentation

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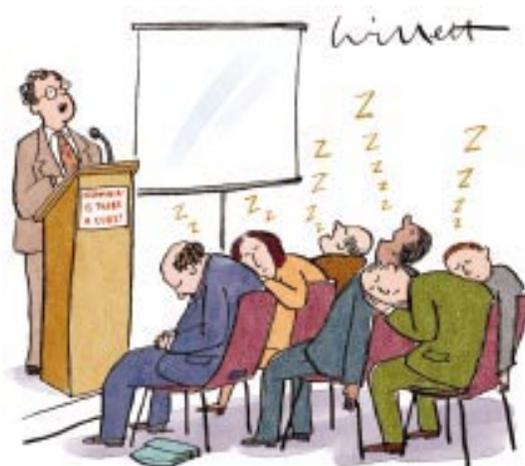
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The invitation arrives. You are invited to speak on the same programme as the Pope, Bill Clinton, and Madonna. Beside yourself with excitement, you forget that you've had these sort of invitations before—and that, for some strange reason, none of the famous people ever turn up. They are all replaced by people you've never heard of and who turn out to be even more boring than you. Having accepted the invitation, you get your own back by forgetting it completely. Two years later, 15 minutes before you are due to start speaking in Florence, you receive a telephone call in your office in London asking where you are.

"I'm sorry," you answer lamely, "I forgot."

"Don't worry," answers the cheery voice at the end, "We'll just ask Madonna to speak for 20 minutes longer. The audience of world leaders will be disappointed you're not here, but extra Madonna will be some compensation."

Far from ruining this presentation, you may have improved the world leaders' conference. But forgetting altogether that you agreed to speak is a good way to make a mess of your presentation. A variant is to arrive late. Don't arrive too late because they will simply have cancelled your session, probably sending a thrill of pleasure through an audience facing the prospect of five consecutive speakers.



Preparing for a bad presentation

One way to prepare for a bad presentation is not to prepare at all. Step up to the platform, open your mouth, and see what comes out. With luck, your talk will be an incoherent ramble. This is, however, a high risk strategy because spontaneity may catch you out. Most medical presentations are so premeditated that spontaneity may inspire both your audience and you. Inspiration must be avoided at all costs. Similarly you might be caught out by truth: "I've been asked to promote this new drug, but actually I'd be fearful of throwing it into the Thames because it might poison the few shrivelled fish that survive there." Truth is compelling to an audience, even if mumbled.

A really bad presentation needs careful preparation. A useful standby is to prepare for the wrong audience. If asked to speak to Italians speak in German. If the audience is composed of 15 year olds then prepare a complex talk that would baffle a collection of Nobel prize winners. It's much the best strategy to give an over-complicated presentation. "Nobody ever lost money underestimating the public's intelligence," said Barnum, Richard Nixon, or somebody, and so you may be surprised by how well your grossly oversimplified presentation is received by your audience of professors.

Be sure to prepare a presentation that is the wrong length. Too long is much the best. Most of the audience will be delighted if your talk is too short, not least because it may provide more opportunity for them to hear their own voices. But something that is too long always depresses an audience, even if what you are saying is full of wit and wisdom.

Another trick is to ignore the topic you are given. Simply give the bad presentation that you have honed to the point of perfection by deleting anything that raises a flicker of interest. With luck, most of the audience will have heard it several times before.

You may be able to enhance your bad presentation by sending the organisers in advance a long and dull curriculum vitae. Your presentation may then be prefaced by the chairman reading out your whole boring life story in a monotone. If you are lucky you might find yourself beginning your presentation after you were supposed to finish.

Aids to a bad presentation

When it comes to aids, standards are rising for those who want to give bad presentations. Technology has produced breakthroughs. First rate bad presentations are usually multimedia: poorly filmed videos that are long and incomprehensible; tapes that are inaudible; music that is out of tune; props that initially can't be found and then break; and Powerpoint presentations that use every feature the software offers.

Bad slides are the traditional standby of a bad presentation. There must be far too many. They must contain too much information and be too small for even those in the front row to read. Flash them up as fast as you can, ensuring that they are in the wrong order with some upside down. Be sure to say at some point, "I know that this slide breaks all the rules but..." Ideally there should be little connection between what you are saying and what is on the slide. A good trick, especially with a politically correct audience, is to insert a slide of a naked woman and say something like, "My beautiful assistant is, I'm sure you will all agree, a little top heavy."

Delivering your bad presentation

The essence of a bad presentation is to be boring. Anything that isn't boring will detract from your bad presentation. Don't wear interesting or unusual clothes. Never look at the audience. Mumble your presentation, and preferably read it. A presentation that is read will usually be satisfyingly bad, but for the full effect you should have long complicated sentences with dozens of subclauses. Try for something as complex as Proust, but get the grammar wrong. Then put all the emphases in the wrong place to ensure that your audience can't understand what you're saying.

Try to torture your audience. Speak for about 10 minutes and then say, "This is what I'm going to talk

about." Then after another 20 minutes say, "I'm now coming to my central point." Ten minutes later, start saying, "Finally." Say it at least five times in the next 15 minutes.

Winding down

A truly bad presentation rarely produces any questions. Most people just want to get away. If you do get questions, you may have failed. But all is not lost. By sticking to the basic rules of being boring and overcomplicated and speaking too long, you may be able to rescue your bad presentation. The extra rule on answering questions is that under no circumstances should you answer them. Once you have finished say, "Does that answer your question?" If the questioner has the effrontery to say no, then don't answer his question again—only at greater length. This formula can be repeated if necessary, but a third non-answer is hardly ever needed.

This guide is written, you will have judged, from long experience. I've made all these mistakes, and more. Kurt Vonnegut boasts that he gave such bad lectures when a lecturer at New York University that he fell asleep during them. I remember giving a lecture in Manchester on creativity in science where the entire audience was almost unconscious and I suddenly thought, "This is rubbish, utter rubbish." I was tempted to stop and say, "You're not enjoying this, and neither am I. Let's stop and go down the pub." I didn't, and thank goodness that I didn't—otherwise it wouldn't have been an outstandingly bad presentation.

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The Christmas present

ZEN (Zambian enrolled nurse) Jason dried his hands and looked through the window. "Do you think it will rain today?" His colleague followed his gaze. "No, not today. Again not today. The rains are late."

All along the Great Eastern Road from Malawi the sky had been filled with towering cumulus, but the bottoms of the clouds were hard and little rain had fallen after the first, the "planting rains," a few weeks earlier. Where it had fallen the little maize plants, each with its attendant heap of urea crystals, stood up straight and green in the dark soil, but mostly the land was greyish and so hard the foot left no print. In the hospital, adults with malnutrition were being admitted. As I moved from one ward to another or took an evening walk, I found myself, a convinced agnostic, looking hopefully at the sky and praying for rain. But no rain came, and in time the clouds moved away, leaving bright, searing skies day after day.

On Christmas Eve we had the hospital carol service. The little chapel was stifling with the heat from 50 or so lighted candles, but the choir sang beautifully, giving an African syncopation to the familiar tunes. The babies slept on their mothers' backs and the patients with tuberculosis, in their red gowns, formed a colourful frieze. Outside the night was cool and fresh, but the ground was hard and still the rains had not come.

In many Anglican mission hospitals there is a tradition that the medical staff serve Christmas dinner to the nurses; fortunately for all, they are not also expected to cook it. I was circulating with a couple of overfilled plates when I heard what sounded like a load of pebbles falling on to the roof. For a moment I was frightened; then, on looking out of the window, I saw a fantastic sight, a weird ballet. The children, who had had their faces pressed to the panes, waiting for the moment when they would be given the scraps, ran for shelter and then, bodies gleaming, mouths widened in a grin, danced back into the rain. In no time the ground was deep in water, and the splashes from their feet joined the raindrops bouncing roof high. Inside we, too, laughed and a few clapped. The rains had come.

On my next evening walk the maize was again standing straight and tall. A few weeks later the stalks were head high, and there, where the branches met the main stalk, were little pools of water; perfect breeding grounds for mosquitoes. The next week we started admitting the under 5s with malaria. There are few free lunches in Africa.

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