



The #1 Myth in Presenting

An oft-cited study supposedly proving "what you say" is less important than "how you say it" has been misinterpreted for decades.

In the 7 years since I wrote *Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes*, I've been conducting workshops based on the book for public interest audiences across North America. Attendees frequently share advice they've received from other trainers, and while much of it is useful, there are some wrong-headed ideas and one particularly persistent myth that should be put to rest.

As a general rule, beware any advice that specifies an absolute limit on words per slide, screen-time per slide, or total slides per presentation.



Albert Mehrabian, Ph.D.

(Please note: I am not referring here to presenting formats such as PechaKucha where 20 slides are displayed for 20 seconds each.) While I agree with the general principle that less is more, I've seen plenty of presentations that ignore any arbitrary limits and are still completely engaging.

And be especially wary if someone tells you, "It's not *what* you say, it's *how* you say it." Admittedly, there

is some truth in there: presenters who can look you in the eye and speak authoritatively will have more success than those who keep their noses in their notes and mumble in a monotone. But the research most often cited as proof that nonverbal cues overwhelm actual content has been widely and repeatedly misinterpreted.

In 1967, UCLA professor Albert Mehrabian conducted a study entitled, "Inference of attitudes from nonverbal communication in two channels." From a series of tests involving face-to-face communications, he concluded that 38% of communication is inflection and tone of voice, 55% is facial expression, and *only 7% is based on what you actually say.*

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"How you say it" matters less than you think.

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Since then, many communications consultants and public speaking coaches have cited this study, and the results have been quoted so widely they are often referred to in shorthand as the 7%-38%-55% rule. If you take a closer look at Mehrabian's study, however, you'll see that its implications for interpersonal communications - presentations included - are extremely limited.

In Mehrabian's experiment, subjects were divided into two groups: "speakers" and "listeners." The speakers were instructed to say a single word, such as "dear" or "terrible," and the listeners were asked to determine how that speaker felt about them. The listeners had only that one word plus whatever they could observe in the speaker's delivery. In addition, the speakers and listeners were complete strangers, so there was no additional context for the listeners to draw on.

Given this set-up, you can see how the listeners would be actively looking for nonverbal cues, and also how someone can say "dear" and yet look like they consider the listener to be anything but. More importantly, consider how different this set-up is from a typical presentation, where there is context around the speaker, much more than one-word utterances to be decoded, and where the listener's objective is not related to the speaker's feelings.

Mehrabian has attempted to debunk the mythology that's grown up around his research. On his website, he posted the following: "Please note that this and other equations regarding relative importance of verbal and nonverbal messages were derived from experiments dealing with communications of feelings and attitudes (i.e., like-dislike). Unless a communicator is talking about their feelings or attitudes, these equations are not applicable."

Nevertheless, the myth persists, and I heard the familiar refrain, "It's not what you say..." as recently as December. If you hear it, just remember that for presentations it's not an either/or proposition. What you say *and* how you say it are both important.

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