EDITORIAL

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This is a busy slide: Fix your presentations this year

It's conference season, and you are ready to mop up some new data during a slate of plenary talks on the bleeding edge of urology. You are a clear-headed, perfect-postured, protein-breakfasted sponge. Three minutes later, you're already scrambling. You started reading the wall of text faster than the presenter spoke; now your eyes are darting through a field of 14-point font bullet points like you're watching Press Your Luck, unable to recalibrate. Next there's a table — 20 rows, eight columns — on the screen for all of 20 seconds. At least the presenter added a crimson border to the relevant row, so you know where to direct your eye strain. You have a sudden suspicion you're about to be served a western blot and a heat map.

On cue, some damned array of 130 genes, a pixellated rectangle that might as well be an infrared image of a fart. Weren't we just talking about a clinical trial? The talk ends and you feel fatigued — not from the vim of new insight, but the effort of maintaining the thread through so much clutter. You're also a bit crestfallen. What seemed like an opportunity to emerge wiser has not come to pass.

There is a name for this familiar feeling: it's cognitive overload, and it seems to be the default mode for the audience of presentations, now and for as long as you've been watching them. I'm here to tell you that it's a shame, and that you deserve better. Knowledge translation is the point, and speakers are just the people to help make it happen, but we (me too) seem programmed to fumble at the moment of opportunity.

In "how not to take an editorial stance" form, let me start with why I may be wrong, that the uniformity and ubiquity of academic presentation style may be just fine, and I should stop being so sanctimonious. The standard presentation format is a cultural artifact that sets the tone and expectations. We know what is happening and how to engage, and no one will get upset. Perhaps experimentation with other models has long since occurred and we are served the product of this evolution. There are plenty of reasons for this.

First: academic material is complex, and a stock photo of a handshake or a scale cannot supplant actual data from research or in building a case. To summarize data, describe a clinical trial, or explain a pathway, this information has to make it on to the slides; one can't build trust without tangible evidence. Second, and related, the speaker is the expert in the room, and they may feel it's their job to telegraph their bona fides and the complexity of the information. A trap here is that the material is usually easier to the expert — that is, they have well-honed schemata of their subject, and thus will underestimate the processing needs of the less-expert audience as they pound through their deck. A clue is that the other subject experts in the room are the ones who pop up to say, "great talk" and ask questions (or posit their own hypotheses).

Next is the fact that slideware wants you to pop in a title and starts the first bullet on your behalf the second you begin to type. This low-friction unspooling of ideas becomes the default. Life is busy, so why resist this easy and familiar format? Bullets help guarantee that you will not forget anything and won't punt on the exact phrasing of your choice. We audience members can just snap a pic of your prose with our phones, so they effectively become documents anyway. Besides, public speaking is a horror to many of us, so the crutch of certainty in the slides is an excellent preventative and palliative.

I'll repeat — this is a shame. Ubiquity is a sign of acceptance, but not necessarily of quality, and an equilibrium may be satisficing, but neither satisfying nor effective. A brute force approach to maximizing information density on screen, hoping something sticks, is inelegant compared to spending some energy on the shooting percentage as well. People are feeling poorly as they try to listen to words they've already finished reading, and struggling to determine which elements on the

slide are germane and which are related. That image is tiny, and the table was meant to be perused on paper and with no time restriction to extract the message. Look around at the siren song of audience members' phones when hope of knowledge translation is lost.

There are a great many books that elaborate on the macro and micro of effective presentations, and everyone who presents with any regularity ought seek one out (I'm partial to Better Presentations by Johnathan Schwabish, as it centers on data-rich presentations more than others[1]). I think a simpler and quicker approach is closer at hand.

We need not become designers or invest 5x the time in building a talk. It doesn't mean TED-style riffing, headset microphones, and big-idea evangelism every time. It just takes an awareness of a few principles and can be as simple as a quick slide revision with a view to simplifying text, blowing up the key parts of graphics, and putting related items together. I propose a three-part model to help understand how things go awry, and give some direction to minimizing the harms and optimizing the gains of a presentation. I should learn from my own words ;)

1. Attention management

There is, of course, a voluntary aspect to "paying attention," but the sensorium is always scanning. One can't help but attend to the sound of glass shattering, or a bat flitting across the room. So too are we compelled to the work of parsing a slide. Text? Eyes will head top-left and start reading. Visuals? The most compelling aspect wins first glance. The bad news is that the inscrutable table or dense pathway figure will cause fits of searching for labels and context. That tangentially relevant western blot will crowd out any working memory for the point of the slide. Complete sentences compel reading, usually faster than presenters read them aloud. The good news is that you can exploit the attention filter with signalling. Simply revealing bullets one at a time and using large arrows and boxes will help orient the viewer. Cut the sentences and replace with the minimum text that contains the data. Low effort, huge reward.

2. Sensory processing

This is code for size and contrast. Make the elements clear from the background and blow everything else up! Move the title to the very top. Blow up the fonts to 22-point minimum. Stretch the graphics to fill the slide. Put every idea on its own slide; you're not carrying a carousel like it's 1986. Zoom in on the table or just rewrite it quickly with the relevant data in large text. Low effort, huge reward.

3. Cognitive load

Your presentation imparts a "load" on the audience member. All of the information piles into working memory for processing, and only if connections and sense are made will schemata form and encode into long-term memory.

The *intrinsic* load is the complexity or difficulty of the material. It varies between recipients, as those already expert can process complex concepts more easily than novices . There's not much you can do in the moment to change the complexity or the audience's knowledge base, but you can think ahead about each.

The *extraneous* load is everything about the speech and visuals that is not relevant to understanding the material. It is the mental effort required in deciphering redundant text, linking words and visuals, or parsing dense graphics: a marginally relevant image, the static of hearing words being read as you try to read them, irrelevant lines on that table, the back-and-forth to align the figure legend with the curves. These fall under the research-backed principles like coherence, redundancy, and spatial contiguity, and these names suggest the solutions.[2] Cut the superfluous text and visuals, even if interesting. Signal to the relevant points on the tables and visuals. Bring like elements together on the slide to decrease the work of linking them. Graphic design principles — alignment, repetition and proximity — are the tools of facilitating understanding by removing clutter. Again, a sweep to declutter and intentionally arrange your slide deck is a quick and very powerful thing.

Evidence-based clinicians ought to be evidence-based presenters. Any small foray into slide architecture is not just slide design, but information design. Attending to your work this way is respectful and empathetic to audiences, and a form of rehearsal and learning for the presenter. We value expertise and are rewarded richly when knowledge translates effectively. See you in Ottawa ;)

REFERENCES

1. Schwabish J. Better Presentations. Columbia University Press 2016
2. Mayer RE. Multimedia Learning, 3rd ed. Cambridge University Press 2021

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