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[Home](#) » [Blog](#) » Crafting a Clear Message

## Crafting a Clear Message

*This is the second post in a series about presentations.*

*“Do only what is necessary to convey what is essential. Carefully eliminate elements that distract from the essential whole.... Clutter, bulk and erudition confuse perception..., whereas simplicity allows clear and direct attention.”*

*–Richard Powell*

In my [last post](#), I mentioned the “elevator pitch” test, in which you practice speaking your presentation to a friend in 45 seconds. This important exercise forces you to boil down all your crazy, rambling ideas to the bare essentials.

Including too much information in a presentation is like underlining everything on a page. If everything is important, than nothing is important. If everything is a priority than nothing is a priority. You must be ruthless in your efforts to simplify, but not dumb down, the message to its absolute core. [1]

### They haven't heard a thing you've said



With a hundred things fighting for attention throughout a persons day, you'd be lucky if your audience remembered *one thing* from your 10 minute presentation. What do you want that *one* thing to be? What is the absolute smallest granule of knowledge that you want to impart to your audience? That is your core message.

In their book, “Made to Stick,” the Heath brothers explore what makes [messages sticky](#) and memorable. They say the biggest obstacle to “sticky” messages is the *Curse of Knowledge*:

*“The Curse of Knowledge is the condition whereby the deliverer of the message cannot imagine what it's like not to possess his level of background knowledge on the topic. When he speaks in abstractions to the audience, it makes perfect sense to him, but to him alone.” [2]*

## Our love/hate relationship with simplicity

As the world becomes more complex, people crave simplicity. They love it. The iPod won because it was simple. Simple is good, simple is easy, simple is viral. Complex messages are hard to understand, and are hard to tell a friend. Simple ideas become viral because they're easy to recall, explain, and relate to.

But we also hate simplicity. Simple ideas can be mistaken as shallow, dumb, and lazy. You don't want to appear dumb and lazy do you? Then you better beef up your PowerPoint with more facts and figures. Why do so many product feature lists say "and much more" at the end? When in doubt, add more and say more, right? But this just dilutes the core message.

*Disclaimer: I am the same person who is in charge of our website, and as I write this I do realize I need to take some of this advice to heart. Our current website is a little complex and requires simplification.*

## Learn to love simplicity through restraint



Lately I have been experimenting with a time management system called the [Pomodoro technique](#). I'm working in strict 25 minute blocks with mandatory 5 minute breaks in between. The idea is that the mind is kept from multi-task fatigue by active rejection of interruptions and laser focus on a single task until the pomodoro timer rings. I've found the result to be greater efficiency and more awareness of where my time is going through out the day.

The reason this system works is because of the constraints. "In the field of design there is the belief that with more constraints, better solutions are revealed." [3] Professional designers live with hundreds of constraints on a daily basis, because that's how the design world works. Nondesigners, on the other hand, can easily get frustrated or go overboard with all the various options, effects, colors, and templates afforded to them by modern presentation software.

The solution is to impose strict restraints on your presentation and stick to them. This will help creativity and simplicity. For example, in 2003 a presentation style emerged from Japan called Pecha Kucha. You are allowed 20 slides which display for 20 seconds on an auto-rotation timer. That's 6 minutes and 40 seconds to give a presentation and that's it. It has become a global phenomenon in 80 cities, and is great practice for honing your presentation skills. [4]

## Restraint means focus

In summation, use the elevator technique to find your core message. Then continuously reevaluate your entire presentation based on the core message. Does this awesome slide I worked so hard on, full of facts and figures strongly contribute to my core message? If the answer is not an immediately YES, then get rid of it. The simpler and clearer your message, the higher probability your audience will remember something.

## Notes/Credits

This article was inspired by an awesome book:

[Presentation Zen](#) by Garr Reynolds. It's highly recommended!

- [1] Page 77 – "If everything is important, nothing is important." I love this line.

- [2] Page 76 – I suffer from this disease frequently. When I'm working on a project for too long, I lose perspective on it. The six principles of "SUCCESS" help fight this disease: Simplicity, Unexpectedness, Concreteness, Credibility, Emotions and Stories. [Learn more.](#)
- [3] Page 39 – We all hate restrictions, but perhaps we can learn how to use them for our benefit.
- [4] Learn more about Pecha Kucha here: <http://www.pecha-kucha.org/>. I haven't tried this yet, but I'm eager to on my next presentation.

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