

Presenting

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Learning Outcomes

In this chapter you'll learn all about Oral Communication in the form of Oral Presentations and Poster Presentations. You'll demonstrate your ability with presentation media and with public speaking skills, including

- focusing a topic,
- adapting it to the understanding of a particular audience,
- organizing main points coherently and supporting them with adequate detail, and
- delivering a message effectively using appropriate audio and visual aids.

17.1 Zen and the Art of Oral Presentation



As important as it is to write clearly in today's professional world, speaking clearly is equally essential—in meetings, on the phone, in formal presentations, in conversations with supervisors and subordinates, at conferences, in elevators, and even when asking for a raise. It turns out there's an art to speaking clearly just as there's an art to writing clearly, and many of the same tools you use in writing can help you create exceptional presentations.

Often when I introduce the concept of presentations, my students tell me this fills them with dread. One of the reasons for this dread is past bad presentation experiences. For every amazing oral presentation in this world, there are oodles of terrible ones. You've probably sat through one yourself—the kind that's either endlessly boring or excruciatingly embarrassing or just misses its audience completely. So it's my job to teach you the life-and-death skill of creating an awesome oral presentation so no one ever has to suffer from what's commonly known as ["Death by PowerPoint."](#) I, too, have suffered from a bad presentation experience.

Bad Presentations

When I was eight years old, my family moved from the urban, diverse, fairly dangerous South Side of Chicago . . .



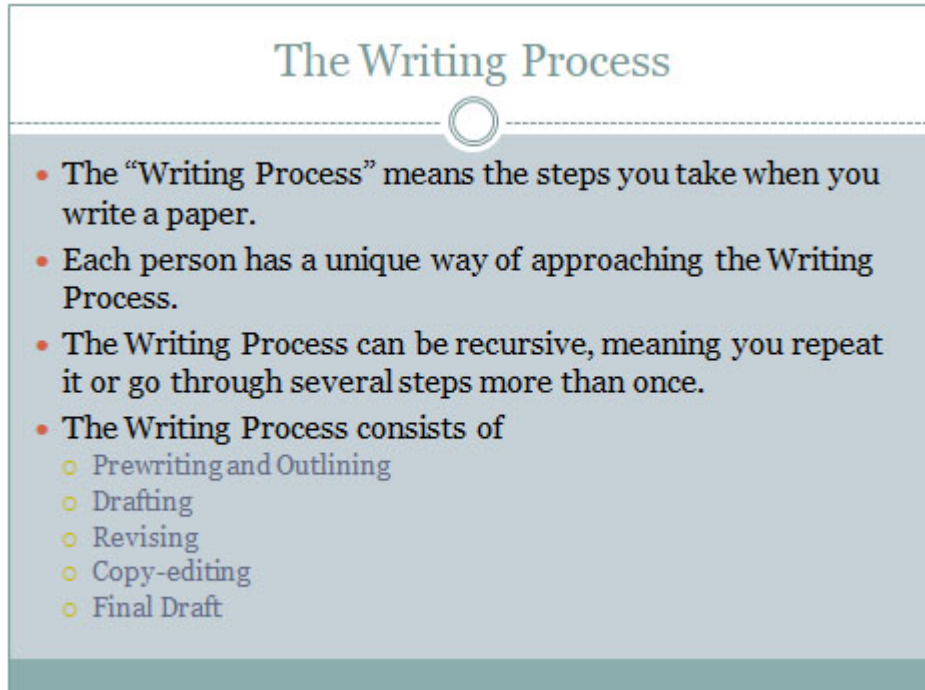
. . . to suburban, much-less-diverse, very-non-dangerous Provo, Utah.



As you can imagine, I had some culture shock. For example, I was used to a very small group of children in my church congregation in Chicago where I felt confident and at home. That all changed when I walked into my new children's church room bursting with dozens of kids all staring at me—the New Girl. Soon I was asked to give a two-minute talk in front of this group. What would have seemed like a simple task in Chicago now loomed like the scariest monster in Provo. How could I possibly give a talk with all those eyes staring at me—the New Girl?

My mom devised a solution: she found a big picture from a scripture story and taped my talk to the back of it so I could hold the picture up in front of my face while I spoke. So that's what I did: I stood at the mic, held on to that picture in front of my face like a battle shield, and read my talk word-for-word off the back. This, clearly, was a low point in my presentation history.

Luckily, it got better. As I grew older, I got more and more comfortable speaking in front of an audience and even gave a few successful presentations in high school and college. I learned how to take my notes and morph them into bullet points on a PowerPoint slide (like the one below), sometimes with a picture or two added for interest. And I eventually got by just fine.



My Old, Text-Based, Me-Oriented Format

But it wasn't until I began teaching at BYU that I found my *presentation zen*. Literally. A colleague of mine (Brian Jackson, the author of Chapter 3), gave me a book called [*Presentation Zen Design*](#) by Garr Reynolds that changed my whole outlook on presentations. I had imagined my presentations in class as a way to portray my points one-by-one on a screen (me-oriented), but Reynolds made me think from my audience's point of view and decide what would appeal most to them (audience-oriented). The result was slides like this new, zen one.

The Writing Process



My New, Zen Audience-Oriented Slide Format

Presentation Zen

Reynolds who lives in Japan, offers the Buddhist Zen ideas of simplicity, restraint, and naturalness as a model for rethinking the genre of presentations. In other words, like a beautiful and peaceful Japanese Zen Garden, slides should be cleared of clutter and instead point solely to the essence of the message.



A zen garden—and a good presenter—focuses on restraint, simplicity, and naturalness. Photo by [Paul Mannix](#) on Flickr.

Zen Presentations utilize "restraint in preparation, simplicity in design, and naturalness in delivery." —Garr Reynolds (p. 22)

Reynolds insists that presentations encourage the audience to focus on the person presenting—not on the slides. For example, he encourages his readers to get rid of "Death by PowerPoint" (badly designed, bullet-point-based slides that a presenter reads word-for-word) and instead focus on a clear message and slide simplicity—in other words, zen design.

But enough reading! I believe the best thing you can do to learn about all this is to experience other people's excellent ones, so I think we should start by hearing from Garr Reynolds himself from a TEDx Talk he gave in Kyoto, Japan. Don't worry; it's (mostly) in English. I want you to pay attention to both what he says as well as how he presents it since he is, of course, also a master presenter. It's 15 minutes long, but trust me, you want all the information in it, so please watch the whole thing.



[Watch on YouTube](https://youtu.be/YbV3b-l1sZs)

Garr Reynolds's TEDx Talk "Why Storytelling Matters" <https://youtu.be/YbV3b-l1sZs>

Garr Reynolds's TEDx Talk

Describe the top 2-3 presentation principles you learned from Garr Reynolds's TED Talk. What strategies do you plan to incorporate into your own oral presentation?

Did you notice how relaxed Reynolds seemed in his presentation? Did you notice the simplicity of his slides—or the fact that the camera focused on him personally most of the time and not on his visuals? What about the clarity of his message? Could you write down his main point in one sentence? What about the flow? Did it feel organized? Did the

count from 1 to 10 help you know where he was and where he was going? Did you like his additions of humor? Did you learn something? I hope your answer to all these questions is yes.



Simple but captivating images give your audience breathing room. Image by [Hong Zhang](#) from Pixabay.

In the rest of this chapter, we're going to explore the elements that go into two types of presentations: the traditional oral presentation and the poster presentation. There might even be some stories and a video or two. So take a deep, cleansing breath, put on some soothing music, and get ready to find your *presentation zen*.

17.2 The Oral Rhetorical Situation



By aki.sato (aki sato) - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/neco299/5320569712/>, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=12819363>

Just like when facing any writing task, the first step to creating a strong oral presentation is to analyze the rhetorical situation. Garr Reynolds used the example of the art of [Kamishibai Japanese storytelling](#) to explain the three-part harmony of an oral presentation:

1. A master storyteller uses
2. Visual elements (they used hand-drawn slides) to tell a story to
3. An engaged audience.

Sounds like the rhetorical triangle, right? Remember, a *Speaker* (aka *Writer*) gives a *Message* to an *Audience* (see [chapter 2](#)). We'll talk about all these elements, but when it comes to oral presentations, I suggest you think about the audience first.

Audience



Probably the most important thing to consider in creating an oral presentation is your audience. You might have the best message in the world, but if you don't understand your audience, they'll miss or at least *dismiss* your message. Nancy Duarte, owner of a successful presentation design company, gave a [famous TED Talk](#) about what makes the best presentations. She asserted that you as the presenter might *think* that you're Luke Skywalker—that you are the *hero* of

your talk, but you're not. The *audience* is the hero. You are Yoda—the guide. Or should I say, "Luke you are not. Yoda you are."

Who's your audience?

As your audience's guide, you need to understand them, and the best way to do this is to put yourself in their shoes. Most presentation experts agree that the concept of empathy is paramount (Duarte, Reynolds, Stinson); if you can really understand your audience, you'll be much more successful at portraying your message. For example, it's most likely that in this class you'll be presenting in front of your fellow classmates. Part of your grade may even come from your peers.

What an Audience Wants

Think about when you've watched someone else's presentation. What elements did you appreciate about it? Beautiful images? Good data? Humor? A compelling story? Confident delivery? Did anything not go well? How can you apply all this to your own presentation? In other words, what do you think your audience wants from you?

As you prepare, ask yourself these questions about your audience:

- **What do they already know?** This determines how much background info you must provide.
- **Where do they stand on the issues related to your topic?** Do you think they'll be sympathetic about your topic coming into your presentation? Try to put yourself in their shoes: anticipate their objections or concerns, answer their questions, play to their passions. If you don't know where they stand, you can ask a sample of them as you prepare your presentation. In the business world, this is called market research and involves surveys and focus groups.
- **What kind of language style or formality will they best respond to?** You'll use a different level of formality and vocabulary when addressing your professor versus talking to your four-year-old cousin. Similarly, if you aim too formal or too high in your vocabulary, your audience either won't understand or will see you as a snob (or both). If you aim too casual, they'll dismiss you as uninformed or will think you're insulting their intelligence. Strike a balance.
- **What entertains them; what do they find interesting?** This can help you figure out something that will grab their attention. Most college students respond well to visuals and videos as well as compelling stories. But you can also get their attention by stepping away from the technology and doing something offline like a demonstration, description, or discussion. Just make sure that whatever you choose is short, sweet, and relevant to your presentation—no random [SpongeBob dances](#)! (Unless that's relevant, then go for it.)
- **Which appeals will they best respond to?** Think about the three different rhetorical appeals mentioned in [Chapter 2: Writing Tools](#) and how you might use them to further your argument:
 - Evidence and Reasoning—stay organized; use data and evidence to back up your points; set up a clear, logical progression from point to point.
 - Character—show through citations that you've done your homework, tastefully name-drop, use language that will convince them you're knowledgeable without being full of yourself, dress like a professional.
 - Emotion—tell stories, show pictures or videos that demonstrate the impact on people, show vulnerability, pull at their heartstrings.

Zen Connection

Garr Reynolds did a fantastic job of connecting to his audience in the video you watched. He showed that he was aware of his Japanese audience at the TEDx Conference in Kyoto by using examples from Japanese history (like Kamishibai

storytelling), by talking about how he's lived in Japan for many years, and by sometimes throwing in Japanese words or phrases. This emphasized that he was aware that he could seem like an outsider to them but he also understood a lot about their culture and what would appeal to them. As you prepare your own oral presentation, think of similar details or shared experiences or even inside jokes that would appeal to your classmates. What do you have in common?

To really solidify the takeaways about knowing your audience, watch this three-minute video from a presentation design company Stinson who has researched what audiences are (and are not) looking for in presentations.



[Watch on Vimeo](https://vimeo.com/179236019)

10 Things your Audience Hates About your Presentation <https://vimeo.com/179236019>

Purpose



(U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Gabrielle Joyner/Released)

Now that you've considered your audience, another essential question to ask yourself is **What's the purpose of your presentation?** In other words, what's your main message? Can you boil it down to just one sentence?

Generally, oral presentations fall into one of three categories of purpose:

1. To inform
2. To persuade
3. To both inform and persuade.

So a community health worker might give a presentation to inform new mothers about how to care for their baby's needs while a political candidate might give a speech to persuade you to vote for him or her. Generally in this class, you'll be designing a presentation that's meant to both inform and persuade. In other words, you'll most likely be informing your audience about the topic you've studied all semester, but in the end you'll also want to persuade them to do something related to that topic. This "something" is often referred to as a "Call to Action."

Call to Action

Nancy Duarte (the presentations expert mentioned earlier) says that every presentation should end with a Call to Action. She studied thousands of presentations and discovered that the best ones move in a similar pattern:

1. First, they talk about a problem (the status quo),
2. Then they introduce a solution (the new bliss) and
3. Shift back and forth throughout the presentation between the "status quo" and the "new bliss."
4. Finally, they end with a call to action.

To see Duarte's full TED talk, [click here](#). Minutes 5:00-9:00 are especially good.

Imagine your audience asks you the question at the end of your presentation “So what? What do you want me to do about it?” What is your answer?

Purpose and Call to Action

Take a minute and think of your own Presentation topic and write some ideas of what your main message could be. (You should try to distill it down to one sentence.) What kind of problem and solution can you present? Now write a potential Call to Action you can make at the end of your presentation. What do you want to convince your audience to do?

Genre

One last aspect of the rhetorical situation that's valuable to consider is this question: **What are the conventions of the genre**

Just like other types of writing (research papers, proposals, resumes, etc.), presentations tend to follow a specific format. These conventions have been developed over time as people have had success using certain formats and then other people adopt those same formats in their own presentations.



For example, in the last decade, a whole new type of oral presentation has become wildly popular: the TED talk. You've already watched one earlier in this chapter. Technology, Entertainment, and Design (TED) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to spreading of ideas to change the world (cite website). And in order to spread ideas, the TED

organization chose one specific method they thought would be the most powerful. You guessed it: the oral presentation.

The TED organization believes in "the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and, ultimately, the world" ([TED Webiste](#)). TED chose one specific method to change the world: oral presentation.

And, in fact, it's worked. The best TED presentations have been watched by millions of viewers, have spread iconic messages across the world, and have made the best speakers famous and/or skyrocketed their careers. That's a lot of power in 18 minutes!

If you've watched many TED talks, you've probably noticed that most of them have a similar structure beyond the obvious beginning, middle, and end. You probably expect a TED presenter to

1. Start with an attention-getting opener,
2. Give background information that includes why the topic matters,
3. Explain a problem (including evidence),
4. Suggest a solution (including evidence),
5. Perhaps go back and forth between these, and finally,
6. Call the audience to some kind of action.

Within the talk, you probably expect to see visuals and/or videos, hear stories—especially personal stories that reveal some vulnerability and relatability, laugh at additions of humor, feel a surge of emotions related to the problem, and—if the presenter does their job right—desire to act as part of the solution. And you expect all this to fit into the strict 18-minute time limit.

The reason most presenters have gravitated toward these conventions is because they work. The most influential presentations follow this structure. See, for example, [Steve Jobs' 2007 iPhone launch](#) . . .



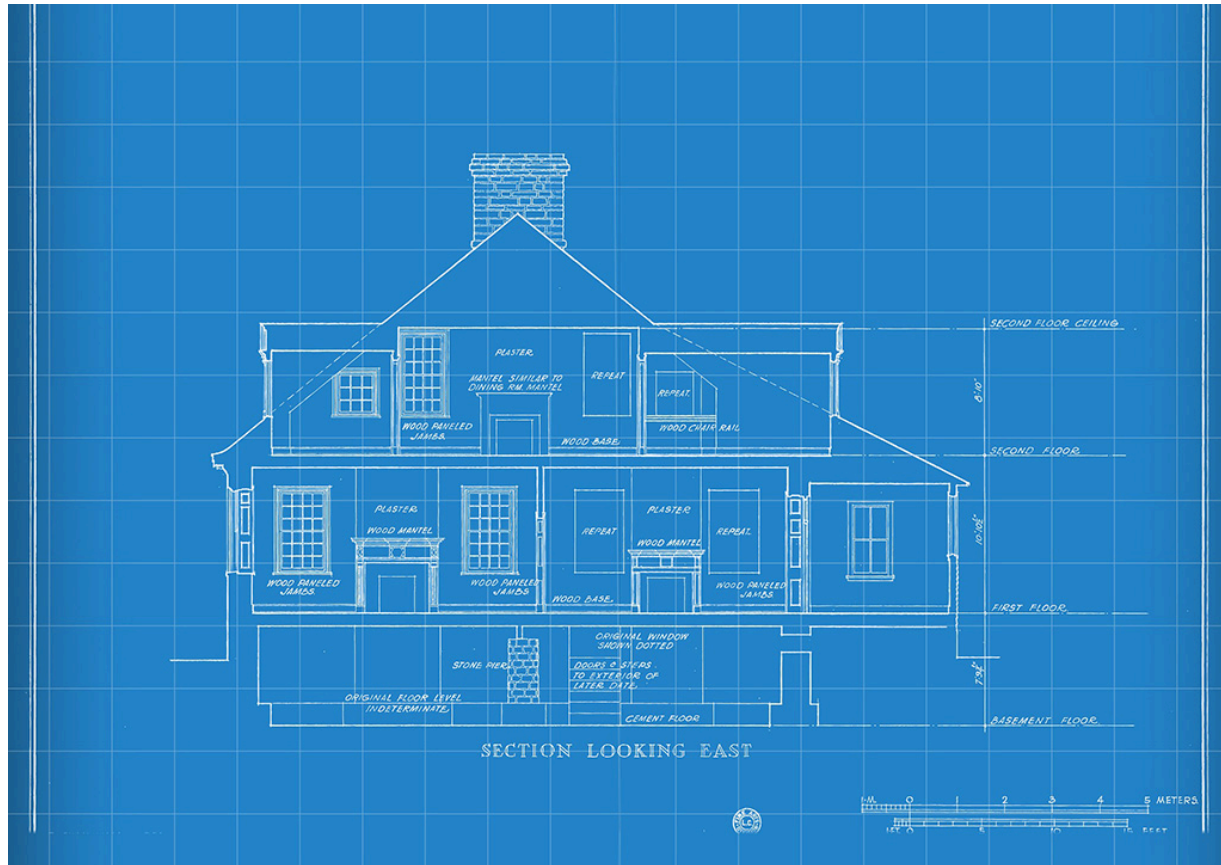
Steve Jobs right before getting the most applause probably ever given by an audience of Techies. Photo by [Miquel C.](#) on Flickr

. . . and Martin Luther King's "[I Have a Dream Speech](#)". Not surprisingly, these elements are also good strategies for you to use in your own oral presentations. That's where we're going in the next section.



Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech is known as one of the greatest speeches of all time. Photo in [Public Domain](#)

17.3 Presentation Structure



Now it's time to plan your structure. Following the conventions of great oral presentations is a great place to start:

1. Beginning
 - Start with an attention-getting opener
 - Give background information that includes why the topic matters
2. Middle
 - Explain a problem (including evidence)
 - Suggest a solution (including evidence)
 - Perhaps go back and forth between these
3. End
 - Call the audience to some kind of action

1. Beginning



Surprise! It's become part of the genre of oral presentations to begin with an attention-getter. The reason for this is that people generally decide within the first 30 seconds whether they think a presentation will be good or not and whether they'll listen in or tune out. First impressions matter, so take advantage of the moment. This doesn't mean you need to do a wild interpretive dance or a stand-up comedy routine or throw out piles of money for people to take notice. You simply need to **do something interesting that's relevant to your topic**. This could be as simple as telling a story or presenting a surprising statistic, showing a poignant picture, or asking a rhetorical question.

Nancy Duarte began her famous TED Talk with the **bold statement**, "I believe you have the power to change the world." In contrast, Garr Reynolds talked about his job as a presentations consultant (introducing an **appeal to character**) and added a promise that he would share the 10 most important things he's learned for improving presentations.

Do something surprising. I remember one of my students started her presentation speaking to us in Japanese for about 15 seconds. This immediately caught our attention because we wondered why she would do something so out of the ordinary. She went on to talk about second language learners and the best strategies for teaching children to learn a second language. By speaking in Japanese, she helped her audience feel how uncomfortable it is not to understand the language being spoken, which made her audience sympathetic to her cause.



"Motherese" is good for babies and presentations on speech pathology. Photo by [Torbein Ronning](#) on Flickr

Do a demonstration. Another student brought a small blanket, wrapped it up and held it like a baby. She began talking "baby talk" to the blanket for a few moments. She then introduced the concept of "motherese" (the exaggerated "baby talk" mothers often use with their children). This student explained that although baby talk was discouraged in the past as immature and coddling, motherese was actually beneficial to children's language development because it turns out mothers naturally exaggerate the sounds the babies first attempt to make. It was fascinating, and I still remember it. I also proudly use baby talk whenever I hold a baby.

Sometimes you can surprise your audience by waiting until after the beginning to really catch their attention. I had a Math Education student who started in a typical fashion describing what she had researched about a certain way to teach the concept of dividing fractions. Then she stopped her presentation, grabbed a marker, and proceeded to **teach us a concept**—in this case a math concept—the way she would in a classroom by writing it out on the whiteboard. She did such a good job teaching the concept that it was like a lightbulb went off in everyone's brains—suddenly we understood how to divide fractions! By *showing* rather than *telling*, this student proved her point that the new teaching method was effective.

The point is that if you think outside the box and find a way to add interest to your topic, your audience will be more interested in your presentation and will keep listening. Think of how you can **involve your audience** in your presentation.

Tell a Story

One universal way to add interest to a presentation is to add some kind of story. (You can also refer to the section in [Chapter 5 Style](#) that talks about story.) According to Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner, a person is 22 times more likely to remember a fact when it's told as part of a story ([Harrison](#), 2015). 22 times! Here's a two-minute video of Nancy Duarte talking about the power of story:



[Watch on Vimeo](https://vimeo.com/20652285)

Nancy Duarte on the Power of Story <https://vimeo.com/20652285>

You can add storytelling elements to your presentation in two ways: globally and locally.

Global Story

If you can take your presentation's message and treat it like a story with a beginning, middle, and end, then you're halfway there. Your presentation itself can feel like a story or a journey you take us on if you start with a theme, develop it with strong points and good examples, and end with excitement and closure. Think of the solution you offer like a "happily ever after."

Local Story



A story about two sisters became very personal for one presenter. Photo by [Ben White](#) on Unsplash

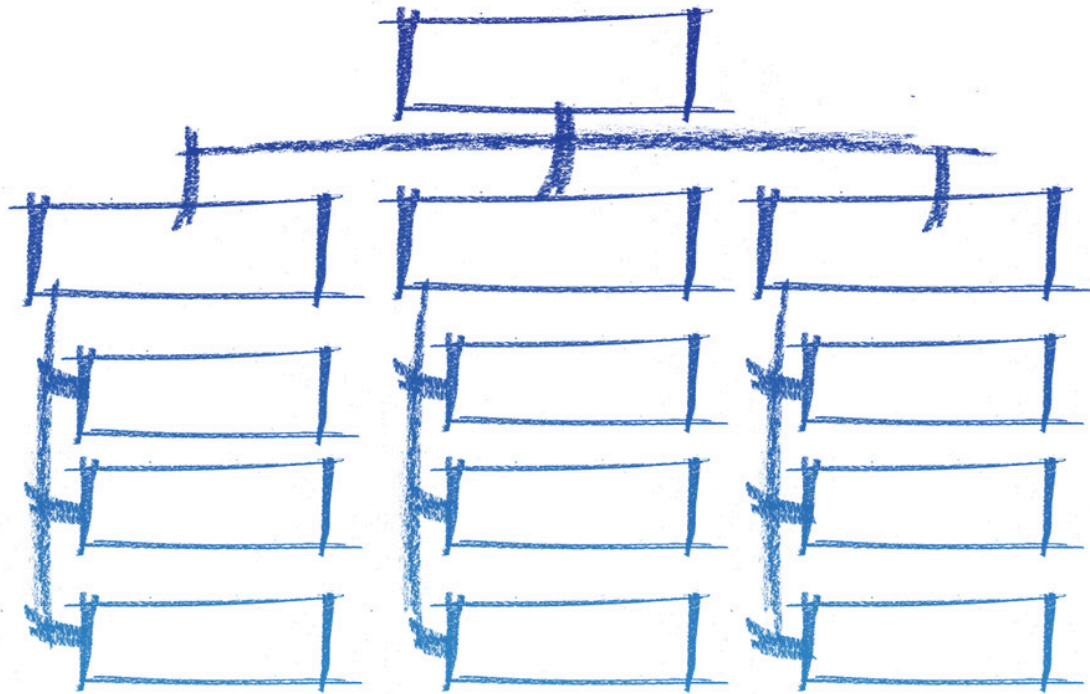
You can also add specific stories about people into your presentation to demonstrate a concept or **show an example of someone affected by the problem** you're talking about. I remember a student talking about a migrant worker named Charles he met while serving as a volunteer in Spain. Charles's picture and personal story of leaving his wife and daughter in his home country in order to work in Spain and send them money stuck with me and added an emotional, human element to a presentation on the economics of migration.

One of the most powerful types of story is a **personal story** because it shows vulnerability and helps your audience identify with you. Most TED Talks include some kind of personal story for this reason. I still remember when one of my students showed a picture of a family and talked about how the older sister's chronic health problems affected the family. She specifically mentioned the consequences the older sister's illness had on the younger, healthy sister—things like feeling neglected, lonely, and scared. She then revealed that the younger sister was herself and went on to talk about her research about the effects of children with chronic illnesses on their healthy siblings. As you can imagine, these presentations that include a story (whether at the beginning or somewhere else) become more memorable and powerful because of them.

Give Background

If your attention-getter is relevant to your topic, it will naturally serve as background on your topic; however, it's also important to explain why your topic is important. You can do this the way you often do in the Introduction of research papers—by providing statistics, giving context, and showing implications surrounding this topic.

Indicate Your Organization



Because your presentation is oral, it will be harder for your audience to understand the logical flow of your paper, so do them a favor and indicate in your introduction where you plan to go in your presentation. Explain your purpose so your audience knows exactly what your point is and then refer back to it in every section. If you use directional words like first, second, next, finally, etc., you can cue your listeners to your organization and help them understand the progression of your points. Similarly, good transitions between sections and sentences will also help your audience follow your organization. You can also add headings to your slides that indicate where you are in your presentation.

Although you'll spend much effort planning your Beginning, it should only take up about 10-20% of your presentation time, so for a 10-minute presentation, that's no more than 1-2 minutes.

2. Middle

If you've done your job at the beginning, your audience should be interested in your topic, understand your purpose, and be ready to hear your main points. In a short presentation (15 minutes or less), you only have time to make about **2-4 main points** before it's time to conclude—it generally takes up to two minutes to make a point. Even in a longer presentation (up to an hour), you still want to focus on only about five main points total, spending a little more time on each than you would in a short presentation. So use your time well. It helps to create an outline of this section to keep yourself organized.

Each point you make should refer back to your overall purpose as you go. Focus on the problem that you're trying to solve and the solutions you're offering your audience. Generally, you want to order your points like this:

- second strongest point first
- the rest of your points in the middle
- strongest point last

This is because your audience will remember your last point best and your first point second best. This section is where you want to cite lots of sources to provide evidence for your points and increase your *credibility*. You can also appeal to your audience's *emotions* as you go and include attention-grabbing elements and stories here as well, although your strongest appeal will be *logical*: whether your examples and evidence are convincing. Again, transitions and directional words (first, second, etc.) will help you guide your audience on your logical journey. The middle section should take up 60-80% of your presentation.

Watch this two-minute video on Presentation Structure from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands where they really like seafood:

Middle Points

Think about your purpose and the middle of your own presentation. List 2-4 main points you could make about your topic to inform and persuade your audience. List them in order of second best, your other point(s), then your best point last.

3. End



At the end of your presentation, as in a typical paper's conclusion, you should briefly summarize your main points—remind your audience of the journey you took them on. If you started with a story or attention-getter, bring it full circle by mentioning it again in the context of the solutions you've offered. Remind your audience of your purpose, then bring it

home with your Call to Action. Answer the question your audience will inevitably be asking: So what? What does this have to do with me? The answer is your invitation to take action to help solve the problem you've introduced. Here are some examples of Calls to Action from my students' class presentations:

- Donate \$1 to a fund to stop World Hunger
- Add the phone number for the suicide prevention hotline to their phones and if they suspect a friend is contemplating suicide, commit to asking them about it directly
- Attend an event during maternal health week at our university
- Call their legislator about an immigration issue
- Be more sympathetic when listening to someone who stutters

As in the beginning, the end should also take up between 10-20% of your presentation. Often you'll take questions at the end of a presentation, so be sure to plan for that in your timing.

Timing



The only way to have impeccable timing is to practice. Photo in [Public Domain](#)

A word on timing. If your presentation has a time limit, DO NOT GO OVER THE TIME LIMIT! Your audience will immediately stop paying attention when your time is up, and if you're presenting for a class, you'll probably lose points on your grade.

Practice giving the presentation, and have a *backup plan* for how to wrap up if things take longer than anticipated. There are various reasons you could run out of time—technical difficulties, the previous presenter going long, a schedule change, etc. Pinpoint places where you could cut or condense your points. I tell my students that when they hit the one-minute-left mark, they should start their conclusion whether or not they've made it through all their other points. Timing is more important than getting through everything—and mentioning any of your middle points is much less important than ending with a strong conclusion!

References

Harrison, Kate. (January 20, 2015) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kateharrison/2015/01/20/a-good-presentation-is-about-data-and-story/#1a09f5912b83>)

Also (Aaker). <https://open.byu.edu/-AQEZ>

Duarte, N. "The secret structure of great talks."

17.4 Presentation Tools



Lastly, we need to talk about the tools you can use to enhance your presentation and improve your delivery so your presentation is received as favorably as possible.

Resources

Slides

Slide software like PowerPoint provides an easy way to add visuals to your presentation, but beware that the focus should still always be on you—the presenter. Remember presentation zen and don't get caught up in adding lots of bullet points or images to your slides. You can use this popular software to create your slides:

- Microsoft Powerpoint
- Keynote
- Google Slides
- Prezi

But the most important thing to remember is **that you don't need anything fancy**—on the contrary, because the focus should be on you not your slides, any slide software should allow you to create simple, clutter-free, message-oriented slides.

Keep presentation zen in mind and don't add something just because you can: don't use fancy swipes or animations, and if you really need to refer to notes, put them in the "Notes" section of the presentation (seen only by the presenter) or use good old-fashioned index cards. See [Chapter 6 Design](#) for more instruction on designing beautiful slides. You can also watch [David JP Phillips's TED Talk on "How to Avoid Death by PowerPoint"](#) where he makes the following excellent points based on what our brains can handle:

- Have only one message per slide
- Use contrast and size to highlight the most important information
- Don't put full sentences on slides (unless you're showing a quote)
- Never include more than 6 items on a slide

How Will You Improve?

Name one presentation tool—concerning visuals or delivery—that you've used poorly in the past that you want to improve in this presentation. Explain how you'll do better this time around.

Images



Photo by [Héctor J. Rivas](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Visuals should be visual. Relevant images are a powerful way to transmit meaning in a presentation; however, you must be careful that your **images enhance what you're saying** and don't detract. One way to do this is if you're using a photo, have it take up the whole space of the slide, touching the edges. You can add text to your slide, but keep it very simple.

You also need to think about copyright. When you're presenting solely for educational use in a classroom, most images and videos will fall under the fair use act and are allowed. However, as soon as you present publicly outside the classroom—even online—you need to be sure you're following copyright guidelines.

A great way to look for images is go to my favorite website for beautiful, copyright-free images (where most of the images from this book come from): [Unsplash.com](https://unsplash.com). Or you can do a Google Search, click on "Settings," then "Advanced Search," then scroll down to "usage rights" and choose "free to use or share." This will bring up images that are generally free to use as long as you attribute who the author is in your text (like a citation). Note: even if you use a copyright-free image, you usually need to **attribute the creator** in the caption with a link to the online location of the image. For more information on copyright, go to <https://copyright.byu.edu/>.

Videos

Videos can be very compelling, but make sure they're **relevant** and that you **only show the essential parts**. No video should be longer than 20% of the presentation, so in an 8-10 minute presentation, it should be no longer than 2-3 minutes. If possible, embed videos into your document instead of just having a link that you click on. That said, watch out for copyright violation. Linking to a document is not a problem, but if you have to download someone else's video in order to embed it, that can be a copyright violation.

If you use links instead, be sure to go in before your presentation and open each video once so no ads pop up at the beginning during your presentation—super annoying! Even if you embed your video, sometimes it doesn't work when you click on it, so I recommend opening the original videos in a different window to have as a backup. Videos are the #1 technology problem in presentations, so have a contingency plan. Incidentally, whenever you introduce a clip—it helps to **tell your audience something to look for** so they watch with a purpose.

Technical Difficulties

I had a French teacher in college who had an anti-talent with technology. Unfortunately, he taught a class on French History where almost every day he had to show art on a slide projector and play music on a CD player (yes, those were the olden days). Inevitably he could never even get a simple CD player to work and would call out, "Est-ce qu'il y a un technicien dans la classe?" Is there a technician in the class? We lost a lot of time in that class due to technical difficulties (and secretly made fun of him outside of class). Don't be like my French teacher—be prepared!



Is there a technician in the class?

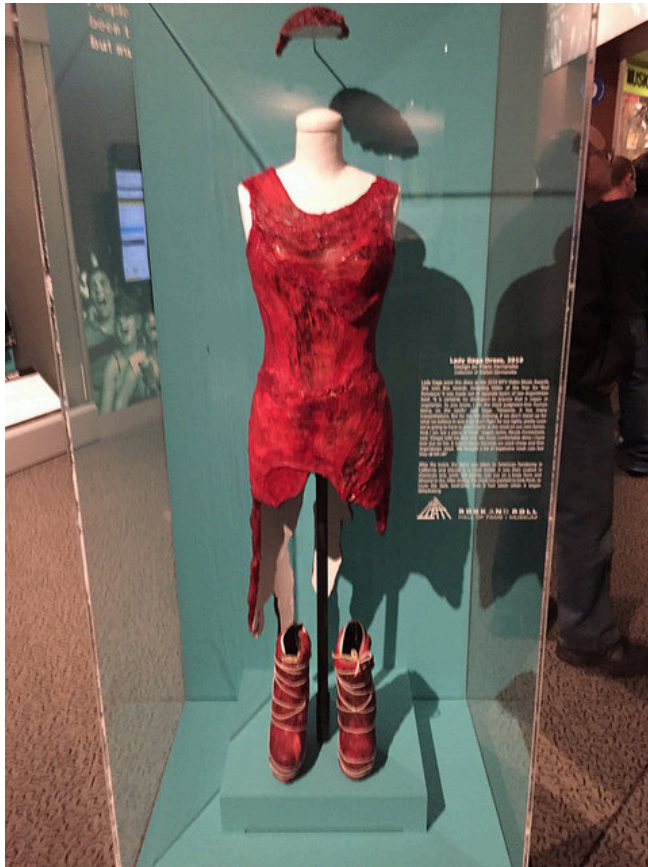
When you only have 8-10 minutes to make a point, you can't afford time-consuming technical glitches. So **make a backup plan!** Come early to set up! Test out your presentation and links before you actually get up to present. Email your presentation to yourself so you can always access it from another computer if your computer dies. Even better, make a copy on a desktop or thumb drive that you can plug into someone else's computer if the internet suddenly stops working.

You can't plan for all technical difficulties—I had a student who wanted to make a point by throwing a glass plate on the ground (it was safely in a ziplock bag). Unfortunately, the bag split open and actually shattered all over the carpeted classroom floor. After a call to the janitor and a lot of distraction, we got it cleaned up, but not without scaring a lot of people and losing valuable presentation time. Here are some tips with dealing with technical difficulties:

- Have a backup plan (or two)
- Try not to get flustered
- If something doesn't work twice in a row, calmly move on
- If you do miss a video, etc., explain what the point of that part of your presentation would have been

Delivery

Dress



Is this a good look for your presentation? Image by [Brian Sawyer](#) on Flickr

You're not Lady Gaga. Don't wear a dress made out of meat. Dress professionally. I tell my students to think about their audience and dress one notch more formally than them. A safe bet is to dress as if you're going to a job interview—that will lend credibility to your presentation. You can't foresee all issues, but you can usually control what you wear. Usually.

As an undergraduate, I once presented a paper at a conference, and several of my colleagues and friends came to watch in the audience. I walked up to the podium, gave my presentation, and walked back to my seat. I thought it went great! Until we walked out of the room and I felt a draft.

I was wearing a long fitted skirt that had a seam up the back, and unbeknownst to me, the seam had split open almost all the way up the back, showing my underwear! It turns out my presentation was much more revealing than I'd meant it to be. It was like living that nightmare where you show up to school in your underwear! And no one told me about it until after the conference session!

Avoid wardrobe malfunctions like mine by choosing professional clothes and practice giving your presentation in them so you can find out at home rather than in front of a crowd that your outfit has a weak seam.



Is this a good look for your presentation?

Practice

I can't emphasize enough the importance of practicing your presentation before you give it. It's almost impossible to get the timing right on the first try, but after practicing it several times with a timer, you'll have a sense of how long each section takes. Find your most honest friend to give you feedback—especially on your delivery.

A lot of people have ticks or habits or gestures that they don't know they do in front of people. For example, I took an acting class and got the feedback that apparently, whenever I'm trying to seem serious or angry, I plant my feet and sway back and forth. When I received my first set of student evaluations as a teacher, one of them said I touch my hair a lot. I had no idea. Nor did I realize it would bug someone throughout the semester. I just wish they'd told me earlier! By practicing your presentation, you can work out all those ticks before you present instead of finding them out in the comments afterward.

Be Confident



Present confidently like this. <https://flic.kr/p/egvm3w> [Public Domain]

Finally, present confidently! And if you don't feel confident, act confident! Research shows that audiences can't differentiate between someone who *is* confident and someone who's just *pretending* to be. Look your audience in the eye and speak slowly and clearly. Most novices speak too quietly and way too fast. If you're using a microphone, you need to speak even slower than you think to be understood. I once spoke at a graduation ceremony and the main note I received during the practice was that I needed to speak half as fast into the microphone! This felt very unnatural, but when I saw the recording afterward, I realized they were right.

If you're nervous about presenting, see [Amy Cuddy's TED Talk](#) about how you can increase your confidence in front of people simply by focusing on your posture.

Conclusion

I hope that now you know that an oral presentation doesn't have to fill you with dread like mine did when I was eight. You just have to find your presentation zen. Simplify, focus on the most important things, stay organized, appeal to logic, character, and emotion, use your resources wisely, practice, and be confident, and you will be on the path to creating inspiring presentations.



Now you're on the path to your presentation zen. Photo in the [Public Domain](#)

17.5 Poster Presentations



Often, academic and professional conferences include poster sessions, which is a different kind of oral presentation. For most of us the term "poster" conjures images of our second grade science fair where we bought a piece of poster board (okay, Mom or Dad bought us a piece of poster board) and then we cut and pasted relevant pictures to help the other kids in our class understand the science principle we had researched. It seems counter-intuitive to use such an old school technology in today's tech heavy world. *But*, many of our second grade skills still work beautifully in an academic conference setting.

What is an academic poster session?



<https://byrdnick.com/archives/11346/classroom-poster-sessions>

Most academic conferences include workshops, panels, and posters. The poster session of the conference is generally held in a large hall with aisles and aisles of posters reporting current research geared toward conference attendees. Poster sessions are loud and chaotic. Dozens of presenters and audiences asking and answering questions and generally engaged in lively research discussions.

Why present a poster instead of a presentation?

You could present your research in a presentation format—and many times you will; but, a poster session allows a much more personal interactive engagement with your audience. According to Colin Purrington, photographer and blogger, "Research shows that people who are standing are more engaged listeners than people sitting in chairs." Audiences can also view your poster when you aren't present.

What is a conference poster?

An academic poster is generally a large paper mounted on the wall with a short engaging title, a prompt to your research question, a little about your research findings, and a short list of published research from experts in the field all presented in a visual graphical format, bright colors, and limited text. Your academic poster should invite an interested audience to come over and learn more.

What are the academic poster requirements?

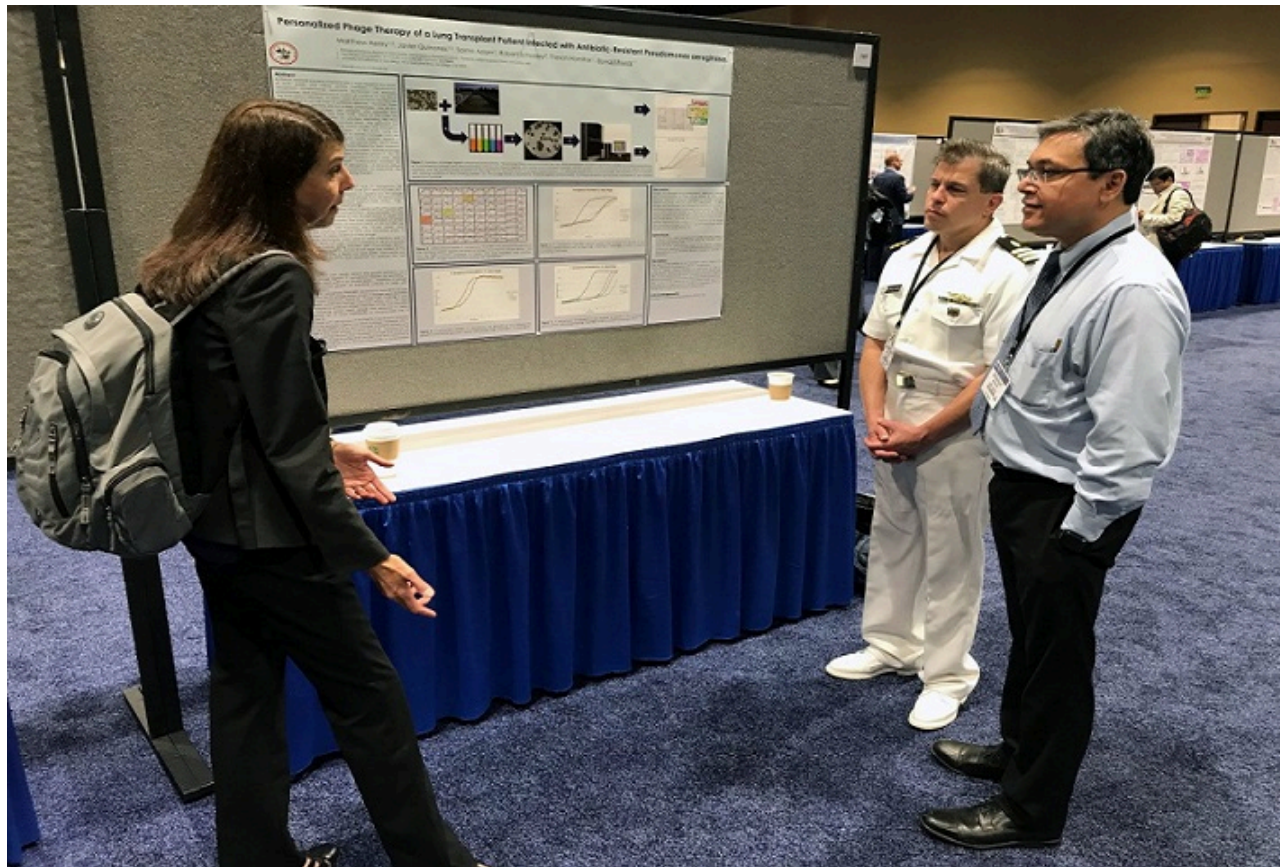
Most academic posters are approximately 3'x4', professionally printed, and organized into columns (usually 3 or 4) and sections or boxes to help readers quickly access research information. Posters usually have a banner heading containing the poster title, the presenters/researchers name or names and the sponsoring body or institution/school. Blogger Colin Purrington shares some [templates](#) to make this process easier.

Design Choices

What template or software did you use to create your poster? Why?

How do I avoid making common poster mistakes?

1. Avoid wordiness. Try to limit text to 1000 words or less.
2. Maintain adequate white space or negative space. Avoid making your poster look crowded.
3. Use a sans-serif font for titles and headings and use a serif font for text (see [Chapter 6 Design](#)).
4. Use list format when appropriate—avoid large blocks of text.
5. Use italics or bold, rather than underline, for emphasis. Underline is generally reserved for hyperlinks.
6. Use consistent single spacing.
7. Avoid hyphenating words.
8. Use consistent contrast. Avoid dark or bright or busy backgrounds behind black text.
9. Avoid crazy color schemes. make your color palette pleasing and appropriate for your research topic.
10. Label graphic elements figure 1, figure 2, and so forth. Give your graphics titles and captions. Provide the source for any graphics and visuals you don't create yourself.
11. Use graphics and pictures. Visual elements draw and inform viewers more than text alone.
12. Make sure viewers can see and read text and visuals comfortably from 3-6 feet away.
13. Format references in the correct format for your field and position the references section at the bottom or bottom right on your poster.
14. Have a colleague proof your poster.
15. Don't plagiarize.



<https://health.mil/News/Articles/2019/02/11/Call-for-abstracts-open-for-2019-Military-Health-System-Research-Symposium?type=Technical+Documents> (licensed for reuse)

How do I present a poster?

1. At most academic poster sessions you stand next to your poster and guide the reader through it; but, it should be designed so that a viewer can understand your research if you aren't there.
2. Give viewers a SHORT 3-4 minute well-rehearsed overview of your poster and your research and then invite questions. The value of a poster session is that it is interactive.
3. Dress Professionally. Avoid chewing gum and keep your hands out of your pockets.
4. Maintain comfortable eye contact.
5. Thank viewers for visiting.

Steven M. Block of Princeton University warns, "Remember that when it comes to posters, style, format, color, readability, attractiveness, and showmanship all count. Take the time to get things right."

Poster Design Revolution

One last note is that there's a grass-roots revolution going on in academic poster design led by Mike Morrison who was a frustrated PhD student who spent a year researching better poster design ideas to try to improve the cluttered, text-heavy conference posters that made conference sessions overwhelming and exhausting. He provides clean, easy-to-look-at templates for his "better design[ed]" posters and explains why's and how's in [this 20-minute video](#). You don't have to watch it, but it's backed by good psychological research and represents a current trend that could make your poster much more likely to be noticed and read.

17.6 The Concluding Conclusion

Communicating to others is one of our most human traits, and now you know how to best present your ideas to other humans. If you remember to analyze your audience, keep yourself organized, use smart design, and act professionally, your presentation will be listened to and make a difference.

We've reached the end of our journey together in this chapter and this book. We hope you've enjoyed your time learning how to improve your writing and communication skills. Now it's your turn to do the second part of our school's motto and the goal of this book:



Cristie Cowles Charles

Brigham Young University

Cristie Cowles Charles teaches writing and literature courses at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. She enjoys sparking a love for writing in her students--or at least a love for having had written (it's always worth it in the end, right?). She thinks pumpkin pie counts as a vegetable, is married to a super hot mechanical engineering and neuroscience professor (yes, they exist), and adores her five magnificent children.



Jill Larsen

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