

Book Review: Presentation Zen: Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery by Garr Reynolds (2008)

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Presentation skills have become an essential part of library instruction. Every day, we're confronted with new technologies, interfaces, or tools we need to present to our audiences, whether they're patrons, students at the reference desk or in a class, or even our faculty. What our audiences have in common is an information need, and they want to find out about the tools that will help them satisfy it. Despite these needs, though, our audiences may not be as enthusiastic as we are. How, then, do we rope them in – and be informative – without overwhelming them?

Garr Reynolds' book, *Presentation Zen*, provides some possibilities. While most of this book is aimed at an audience who would be using slideware (such as PowerPoint or Keynote) in the corporate world, there is much here that librarians can use when preparing and fine-tuning their presentations.

Preparation, the first of the book's three main sections, contains information that will aid librarians designing presentations, whether or not they intend to use electronic slides. For a book about creating a great presentation using technology, it's perhaps surprising that Reynolds recommends that planning should be done away from the computer: use a whiteboard, legal pad, sticky notes – anything analog goes. What every presenter needs to consider, though, are two important questions: "What's Your Point?" and "Why Does it Matter?"

While *we* feel we know the point, and *we* know why this matters, how do we put these in plain terms our audience will understand? Considering these questions as we plan to show a student a new database, or teach a class the importance of scholarly articles, helps us meet our audiences where they are.

Additionally, Reynolds discusses creating an elevator speech as both a planning method and a way to focus your presentation; in a pinch, this summary can be used on its own. It can be quite hard to boil down your 50 minute presentation into just 45 seconds, but this process can really illuminate what is important (and then you can also make sure in your regular-length presentation that these important topics are being covered adequately). On the

subject of handouts, Reynolds advocates against distributing copies of the slides, especially since the slides should be simple and visually oriented. Instead, he recommends creating a separate, stand-alone handout that supports and supplements your presentation. This can be a concise, 1 page summary and bibliography, or a longer piece that covers the main points of the presentation in more detail.

The chapter "Crafting the Story" emphasizes storytelling as a presentation technique. The academic library is full of stories: the students whose professor told them not to use the Internet, the student who waited until the last minute, and so on. Weaving stories into the content helps create a presentation that your audience will remember. This is furthered by a segment written by marketer Seth Godin describing the presentation as a "transfer of emotion" from the presenter to the audience. Referring to the need to stimulate both sides of our brains, Godin notes that audiences need more than just hard facts; they need to *feel* that what we're telling them matters.

The second part of the book focuses on visual design, an important element of a good presentation. The author emphasizes a Zen-like elegance and simplicity. We see this in the planning section, but here it's in the images, the PowerPoint equivalent of Strunk and White's "Omit needless words." Providing examples of the same content presented in both a cluttered context and a simplified context, the author effectively shows how the same information can be overwhelmed by the visuals surrounding it. Reynolds also provides a short primer on graphic design, including the rule of thirds, the use of empty space, and the orientation of images within slides. Examples of presentations that utilize these principles follow at the end of the section.

The final section covers delivery: when it's time to present, whether you're using slides or not. Again tapping into the Zen theme, Reynolds' emphasizes being fully present and being in the moment, which is sometimes quite difficult for librarians who may not have had formal public speaking instruction before finding out that they were to present before a class, a group of colleagues, or at a conference. Of course, the rule of "Practice, practice, practice" still applies, and Reynolds provides examples of speakers who have great slides and great delivery. Ex-

tremely helpful is a small section on "Presenting Under Fire," when you have one or more hostile audience members. Finally, Reynolds suggests getting away from the lectern, and moving around. He recommends purchasing a remote, a recommendation I can wholeheartedly second. Being free from the computer allows the speaker to circulate among the audience, which in turn enlivens the presentation and helps build rapport with the audience.

Many librarians understandably eschew the use of PowerPoint during their one-shots due to time constraints, but the appropriate use of a quick introductory presentation can appeal to students on a different level. Yes, our audiences are there to learn tools that will help them in their research, but great visuals and an introduction that gets them in the gut can go a long way toward replacing the stereotype of the library one-shot as a dry "how to use a database" session with "Wow, the librarian understands the process as I see it and can help me get what I need!"

This short, thought-provoking, and visually engaging book should be on the must-read list of anyone who presents. If you don't rely on PowerPoint in your classes, you can skip the chapters on slide design. The chapters on planning, however, are essential given the time constraints we often face when attempting to present multiple tools in a one hour one-shot.

Mark your calendars!

Blazing Trails: On the Path to Information Literacy

