



How to Prepare and Deliver an Effective Briefing

Xavier de Souza Briggs



A briefing is not a speech

- A briefing is an interactive presentation, focused on helping decisionmakers learn from your analysis of a complex problem or opportunity.
- It cannot be *scripted* formally like a speech, but it can and should be *well-structured*.
- In general, you control the focus, but the briefees may ask you to change the sequence, go back to a key point, or otherwise help them learn, and this is the very purpose. These are *opportunities* for you, not a sign of problems.




The tasks

- Know your audience
- Be clear on the purpose(s) of the briefing and the context (location, time, timing vis-à-vis decisions or actions that follow)
- Carry out your analysis and prepare recommendations
- Decide on your core messages
- Structure the briefing effectively
- Create visual elements as part of your message
- Practice, practice, practice
- Deliver responsively

1. Know the audience and context

- **Make-up: Race/ethnicity? Gender? Generation? Professional culture or affiliation? Size? Political attitudes or loyalties? Education level? Economic status?**
- **Context: How does your briefing fit into a sequence of analysis and action? Whose action?**

2. Structuring: Linear is one way to go

- **Beginning** 
 - **Summarize the issues/questions**
 - **Supply the recommendations**
- **Middle** 
 - **Frame the analysis**
 - **Analyze the issue**
 - **Highlight key findings**
- **End** 
 - **Recap, synthesize, next Steps**

Begin with the end in mind

- **Purpose of the briefing**
- **Recommendations**
- **Roadmap – what structure do you use?**

Middle: Presenting the analysis

- **Inductive Reasoning**

- Put the bottom line on top
- Use with reasonably receptive audiences
- $D = A + B + C$

- **Deductive Reasoning**

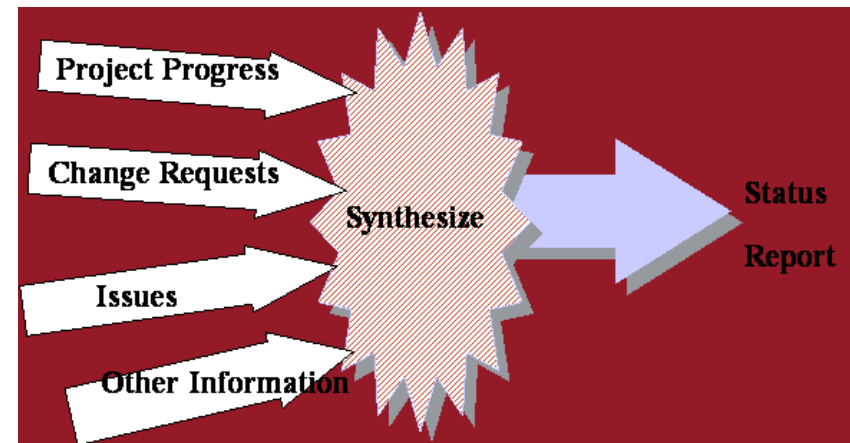
- Build the case, up toward conclusions
- “Mystery novel” approach: what happens next?
- Use with more skeptical or hostile audiences
- $A + B + C = D$

Middle: Choose a structure

- **Cause/Effect**
- **Problem/Solution**
- **Categories or elements of the problem**
- **Questions/Answers**
- **Chronological: emphasize historical background, current “state of play,” alternative futures**

Begin and end with your message

- **Highlight Major Points**
- **Summarize Recommendations**
- **Synthesize in light of problem/purpose**
- **Outline next steps**



© TenStep, Inc. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Nonlinear: Hub-and-spoke structure



Image courtesy of [Jeremy Brooks](#) on flickr. License CC BY-NC.

Overview

- **The hub-and-spoke is a well-tested structure for briefings aimed at busy decisionmakers.**
- **The “hub” is your core message(s), expressed in simple, action-oriented language. It’s the heart of what you want listeners to remember.**
- **The “spokes” are the components of the message, which lend supporting evidence or illustration.**
- **Each member of the team should be able to move the listener from hub to spoke (or vice-versa), as needed, at any point in the briefing.**

Whatever structure you choose, you will need to tell the audience a story, in part with visuals ...

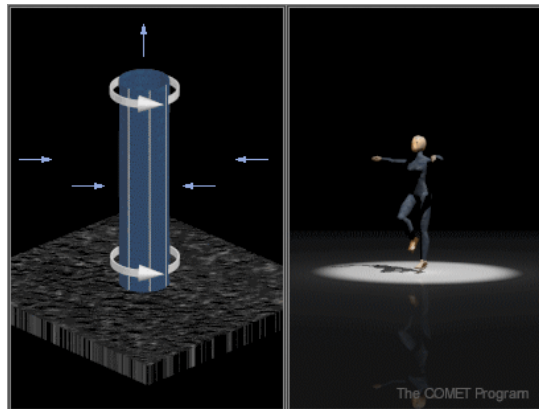
3. Visual storytelling

- The purpose of visual elements is to enhance *comprehension* and *retention* of important ideas. If a slide does not add value, drop it.
- Except in highly design-oriented or marketing-oriented presentations, the main purpose is not to *entertain* the audience per se, though creating visual interest helps engage us.
- The visuals and spoken remarks should be well aligned. This is the concept of a “visual storyboard” (outline) to help you sync the two.

Make your visuals count

Creating the visual elements

- **Keep them simple**
 - Average attention span per slide is 8 seconds
 - Most audiences can handle about 1 slide per minute of briefing
- **Simplify technical concepts with metaphor**



The stretching of vorticity is a difficult physical concept, but comparing it to a skater's conservation of momentum helps to clarify what we mean

© The University Corporation for Atmospheric Research. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>

Visual arguments need evidence

- **Present evidence**
- **Teach with evidence**
- **Convince with evidence**

Image quality matters

- **Consider size: make images legible, intuitive, easily grasped**
- **Choose colors with care: simpler is often better (less distracting)**
- **Make quantitative data accessible: Use minimum 16-point font (general rule), use only the data you need.**
- ***Don't include inappropriate visuals and then apologize for them during the briefing.***

- **Size: Make images legible**
- **Consider colors**
- **Simpler may be better ...**
- **Make data accessible**

Focus on the overall composition

- **What is the eye drawn to?**
- **Where does the reader want to focus?**
- **“Less is more” : use a few simple elements to make a point**

Message content: Emotional arguments

- **Use them sparingly, consider the audience's receptiveness**
- **Have a single message**
- **Appeal to our values**
- **Create emotion: Outrage? Wonder? Delight?**
- **Move us to action**
- **Include evidence and examples (reason + emotion = powerful persuasion)**

4. Deliver the briefing

- Focus and center yourself
- Show enthusiasm for your subject
- Be yourself—don't imitate others' styles
- Don't read us a script—memorize your main points, keep notes at hand if you like.
- *Project* your voice so we can hear and engage with the topic

Preparing and handling questions

- ***Preparing:*** What doubts is the listener likely to have? Where will they want details or extra evidence? Where might they challenge us?
- ***During the briefing:*** Listen carefully. If you're unsure about the question, summarize it and check
- Listen actively (nod, make eye contact, acknowledge)
- Answer the question and move on
- If you don't know or aren't sure, say so; offer to check the facts and follow up, if appropriate.

Rehearse

- **Practice and time the briefing at least three (3) times: The dry run is one.**
- **Get feedback**
 - Content: Is it clear? What's persuasive and what's not?
 - Structure: Is it working for you? Is there a better way?
 - Delivery: Is your body supporting the message or distracting the audience? Voice effective?
 - What are the main ways we can improve?

Rehearse

If you 're on the sidelines: maintain professional composure. You' re always “on.”

If you 're speaking, channel your energy, avoid distracting gestures.

Connect with the audience

- **Use the terms that your audience knows**
- **Use examples to explain new ideas**
- **Engage the audience**
 - Establish eye contact; look at *people* not the screen
 - Use friendly hand gestures
 - Speak to specific individuals if you know them

Connect with your audience

- **A briefing is *two-way* communication**
 - Pay attention to audience reaction
 - Modify your talk as needed (are they listening or doing something else?)
 - Look for nods, smiles and other cues to determine if your message is being received.
 - *Direct* your answer to a question to the person who posed it. Interact naturally, conversationally.

How do you look?

■ Where to Stand?

- If you need to pick a place to stand, make sure you're out of the projection line.
- Mediate between screen and audience: *Direct* our attention, you control the focus.

■ How to Speak?

- Project, Project, Project – Practice
- Pause after complicated ideas
- Avoid a “canned” sound: Don't rely on a speech script, have a *well-informed conversation* with the listeners.

The briefing doesn't live on the screen

- **Don't read the screen**
- **Say more than you show**
- **Handout more than you say**
- **Leave paper trail: important audiences may not be able to attend**

Finish strong

- Try to recap your primary message
- *If culturally appropriate:* Thank the decisionmakers (or other audience members) for their time and attention.
- Offer to take questions (or more questions).
- During Q&A: Use your extra slides (not shown during main briefing), if appropriate, to extend or clarify your arguments, teach the audience more.

Special tips to teams

- **Keep disagreements in perspective: different team members will have different instincts about some things;**
- **Don't focus on dividing up "air time" (speaking time) evenly—focus on whatever will best inform the audience, be flexible.**
- **The team is always "on": Even the members on the sidelines should reflect the team's professionalism, avoid distracting side conversations or body language (e.g. fidgeting).**
- **Decide who will handle what questions and who will "direct traffic" (coordinate) to avoid awkward pauses**

Sources

Purpose, Movement, Color: A Strategy for Effective Presentations

By Tom Mucciolo and Rich Mucciolo, MediaNet, Inc.,
1994

The Quick and Easy Way to Effective Speaking

By Dale Carnegie, Dale Carnegie Associates, Inc., 1962

The Visual Display of Quantitative Information

By Edward R. Tufte, Graphics Press, 1983

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

11.401 Introduction to Housing, Community, and Economic Development
Fall 2015

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.