

5 Fail-Safe Tips When You Forget or Get Flustered During a Presentation

By Dianna Booher

Some goofs turn out to be funny—later, at least to the audience. Before a gathering of gregarious sales reps, I was trying to make the point that business communications are much less formal now than in past decades. “For example,” I elaborated, “when you are introduced to someone, you rarely respond, ‘How do you do?’ Instead, you say something like, ‘Hello’ or ‘Nice to meet you.’”

Continuing this line of reasoning, I asked the group, “And when was the last time your family dressed formally to sit down at the dinner table together? Our family doesn’t dress for dinner.” One rep raised his hand and asked excitedly, “May we come?”

The audience roared with laughter; leaving me dumbfounded until someone in the front row pointed out to me what I’d said versus what I’d meant. Needless to say, after turning ten shades of red, I forgot where I was going with the next point.

Just wait until it’s your turn. If you haven’t yet experienced your point of embarrassment or memory lapse, you will. When it happens, consider these fail-safe ways to regain your memory and retain your poise.

Build a Mnemonic Device to Help You Recall Chunks

Memory experts tell us that our brains can hold only about seven chunks of information at once. For this reason, trying to remember 18 key points, six anecdotes, and three charts of data can be setting yourself up for disaster—unless you devise a better system of recall. Teachers have understood the value of mnemonic devices for ages. For example, piano teachers teach the scales EGBDF as *every good boy does fine*. Think of almost any discipline, and you will find technical concepts conveyed in models, mnemonics, and metaphors meant for easy recall. Create the same for yourself as a prevention tool.

Jump Ahead to a Key Anecdote That Serves as a Springboard

Stories stick better than an elaboration—even with the storyteller. In telling the story, you often will recall the point you typically make with the story by the time you get to the end of the story. And with that key point, the whole section of content will return to the forefront of your mind.

Fiddle with Fodder

Your fodder can be anything that fills a 10-second gap to provide you with thinking time to collect your thoughts. You may decide to take off or put on your eyeglasses so that you can “verify something.” You may pause to take out your pen and jot a note while you regain your memory. You may stop speaking while you suddenly decide to move the flipchart back out of your walking space or erase a whiteboard of irrelevant information and then turn back again to face the group. You might stop to ask the group about the

temperature—whether it is too warm or cool—and then ask someone in the back to adjust the thermostat.

Any of these breaks allow you 10 to 15 seconds—often all the time you need to recover your thoughts and continue. And often after such a movement it seems perfectly natural to ask the group, “Now where was I?” and they will give you your cue.

Change Locations in the Room

A location change to a speaker is like paragraphing to a writer. So it will seem quite natural to your audience that you would pause reflectively and stroll to another spot in the room to move to your next point. In the time it takes you to get there, you likely will have recovered from your memory lapse.

Code Your Visuals to Cue You

Use key words or subtitles to group sections of your visuals to keep you oriented by reminding you of the bigger context for an individual slide. When you are projecting from a laptop, a subtle color bar or icon in the corner or across the side or bottom will cue you about where you are in a segment of presentation visuals. This highlighted color or icon, then, should trigger a complete chunk of information to the forefront of your mind. When you go out on a tangent with a detail and cannot find your way back, all you need to do is glance at the blue triangle to remind you that you are tracking the marketing goals for the second quarter. The orange triangle signals you that you are into third-quarter goals.

When it’s your day to feel flustered, recover seamlessly and smile along with the crowd.

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For more tips on using visuals effectively, see Speak with Confidence: Powerful Presentations That Inform, Inspire and Persuade (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.