

## CHAPTER I

*The Core Message*

If there is one core message to this book, it is that oral presentations should always have a core message. A core message is essentially the conclusion of your work in every-day, non-scientific language. It is the most essential piece of information that you want your audience to remember when they walk out of the room after your presentation. In this chapter, we will show you what a good core message should look like. Everything else that you will present in addition to this core message should support the understanding and acceptance of your core message by the audience.

A core message is the conclusion of your work in one (perhaps two) simple, easy-to-understand sentence(s) (Wagenaar, 1996). It should cover the main conclusion that you draw from the work you present – be it an overview of scientific theories, existing research, a grant proposal, or your own research. Before designing your presentation, ask yourself this: ‘What is the *one* thing you would like your audience to remember from your presentation?’ Remember, it can only be *one* thing. You may wish your audience to remember every single word you uttered, but that is not realistic. So you need to make some tough decisions between various messages, and select that one critical message that captures the essence of what you wish to convey.

Thinking of a core message helps you, as a presenter, to determine what is most important in your presentation. Everything else you will present will be in support of your core message. Given that most oral presentations are relatively short, often between ten and twenty minutes, you simply cannot present all of the details of your work in such a limited time slot. You need to make decisions about what you can or should tell, and what not. The core message is as much a guideline for *you*, as it is for your audience. With the core message firmly planted in the back of your mind, you can ‘dress up’ your presentation with the most important information that your audience needs in order to understand and accept your core message, and omit the parts that they do not necessarily need to know.

### **The Core Message: What Does It Look Like?**

A core message contains the most important conclusion of your work in non-scientific terms. It covers the topic of your work and refers to your most important finding(s). Imagine that a reporter interviews the members of your audience after your presentation and asks them to describe your presentation in a single quote. If your presentation was about the influence of colonial history on popular music in South East Asia, you would probably be more satisfied with a quote such as ‘The decolonisation of this region has had an impact on contemporary local music’ than with a quote like ‘An Indonesian man made music instruments out of empty plastic bottles.’ The first quote is a conclusion of your work, the latter quote is not a conclusion but a fact or piece of information that stuck out – that was somehow more memorable than your key conclusion.

To summarise your work in just one or two sentences is not an easy feat. It requires a bird’s-eye view on your work to decide what is the most important conclusion. One problem may occur when you feel that there is more than one conclusion that can be drawn. Do you then opt for multiple core messages, or do you pick the most important one? We recommend that you pick the most important conclusion, and stick to a single core message. The more messages you have, the more their impact is diluted. Which message you select can depend on several factors, including the type of presentation (Is it formal or informal? How much time do you have?) and the audience. For example, if you present your work on how corporate mergers affect personnel satisfaction, your core message may differ depending on the audience’s familiarity with the topic. A presentation before organisational psychologists may include a core message such as ‘It is important that employees have a sense of continuity of their pre-merger corporate identity after the merger’, whereas a presentation before an audience of managers and HR professionals may lead you to select a different message, such as ‘Mergers lower employee satisfaction.’

As you may have guessed, you have to take some time to select a good core message. First decide what you think is most important in your work. Again, think about what you want people to remember after your presentation. Once you have decided what the most important conclusion is, try to write it down in plain and simple language. This step is often the hardest part in crafting a core message.

Most academics are reluctant to use non-scientific language because they fear a loss of precision or scientific detail. If you fear the same, you

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could try out your core message by describing it to several people and test whether they understand it, and ask for feedback. Keep in mind that a good core message does not mean that the audience does not have any questions – if it did, you could indeed reduce your presentation to a single-sentence core message. The core message can (and perhaps should) raise questions such as ‘How do you know?’ or ‘What do you base this conclusion on?’

One of the authors of this book once presented her research about the effects of breaks in negotiations to a scientific audience (Harinck & de Dreu, 2008). She had compared the effects of negotiations that included breaks to those of negotiations without breaks, and also looked at whether people had a cooperative or a competitive mindset during the negotiation. In addition, her research had looked into different types of negotiations. The main finding was that people with a cooperative mindset were better negotiators than people with a competitive mindset, but only when the negotiation included breaks and not when there were no breaks in the negotiation. She decided on the following core message: ‘Breaks can be good for negotiations when you have a cooperative mindset, and breaks can be bad for negotiations when you have a competitive mindset.’ Note that this message does not cover all of the details of the study – specifically, the different types of negotiations that she looked at are not included in the core message. That doesn’t matter – what matters is that the core message covers what you believe the main conclusion of your work to be.

A core message is *not* by definition the topic of your research or a short summary of what you did. To use the previous example, a core message such as ‘The effect of breaks and cooperative mindsets on negotiation outcomes’ is not a message at all – it only indicates the topic of the work. It may be a decent title for a presentation or a paper, but it is not a good core message because it does not give your audience any directions about the outcome of the work. A core message such as ‘An experimental investigation of the effects of breaks on negotiation outcomes among a sample of 200 university students’ also lacks the conclusion that a core message should have – it is simply a brief summary of the procedure of your work. Remember, scientific work is ultimately about the generation and dissemination of knowledge. Everything we do to advance that knowledge, that is, our work method, is merely a tool. The core message should capture the key knowledge you wish to contribute to the world, not the tools that you used to generate it. A checklist for creating a good core message is provided in Box 1.1.

**Box 1.1 Core message checklist**

A core message should:

- reflect the main conclusion of your work
- be brief – preferably a single sentence
- be a single message, not multiple messages
- be formulated in simple, accessible terms
- be adjusted to the type of audience.

**The Core-Message-First Approach**

Once you know your core message, the next step is to decide at what moment you should deliver that message. It may seem logical to deliver your core message at the end of your presentation. After all, the presentation itself contains all of the building blocks that lead up to your main conclusion – and it is this conclusion that is your core message. And yet, it is far better to present your core message at the beginning of your presentation. Since the audience has usually very little idea of what the content of your presentation will be, a core message delivered at the beginning of your presentation helps to build and set the right expectations. Clear expectations about the content of your presentation can be very useful to an audience because it allows them to properly interpret the value and purpose of the various parts of the presentation.

Delivering the core message in the beginning of the presentation may feel like a spoiler: why listen to the presentation if you already know what the conclusion is? Do not worry that the audience will lose interest in your presentation after you have given them the core message. Usually, a core message raises questions. For example, a core message like ‘Teenagers are much better equipped at planning their homework activities than is commonly assumed’ will only raise more interest for the remainder of your presentation. Your audience will want to know more about how you discovered this, or how well equipped these teenagers really are at planning. Your presentation will provide the answers and fulfil the curiosity raised by your core message. So most of the time, a core message raises rather than reduces curiosity.

A core-message-first approach has two advantages that make it superior to a core-message-last approach. First, starting your presentation with a core message helps the audience to keep up with your presentation. If they already know what the end conclusion of your presentation is, it is easier for them to follow your line of reasoning, or to understand why you are

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giving them specific pieces of information. If you do *not* give your core message at the beginning of your presentation, your audience will try to figure one out by themselves – but this may not be in line with what *you* think the presentation is about, and this can give rise to confusion. What is more, cognitive resources will be spent on figuring out what your presentation is about rather than on following your presentation and comprehending what you are saying.

Second, the core-message-first approach provides you with a time advantage: starting with your core message increases the likelihood that your audience walks away with the message that you want them to walk away with, even when you are running out of time. Although you should not underestimate the importance of proper timekeeping, there may always be reasons why you find yourself short of time at the end of your presentation in spite of all your efforts to the contrary. Perhaps you are just generally predisposed to run out of time in everything you do (yes, some people are simply better at timekeeping than others), or perhaps you encountered some unexpected interruptions, ranging from faulty equipment to clarifications questions. Whatever the reason, we've all been there (or will be there at some point in the future): the 'one-minute left' sign flashes, and you are barely halfway through your presentation. You will have to cut parts of your presentation, speed up, and all of this goes at the expense of the core message that you had planned to deliver at the end. You can save yourself a considerable amount of stress by starting, rather than ending, your presentation with your core message.

### **Conclusion**

An oral presentation stands or falls with a good core message. But a good core message is not just invaluable to your audience – it also helps you, as a presenter, to structure your presentation and to ensure that you delivered your messages even under time constraints. Throughout the book, you will find several other instances of how your core message can help you (e.g., in Chapter 8 about presentation anxiety) and your audience (e.g., in Chapter 2).

By the way, did you notice what we did in the beginning of this chapter? We presented our core message, and then started explaining what it was, and why we think that it is useful. The fact that you continued reading until here is testament to our point that giving away your core message in the beginning does not reduce the interest for the remainder of the presentation.