

# The Secret to Communicating Technical Topics to Nontechnical Audiences: The Four “Cs”

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You're ready. You collected the data, did the analysis, interpreted the results, and have a sound, well-thought-out recommendation—but the presentation does not go as expected. The public is disgruntled and won't listen; the boss makes a politically motivated decision that runs counter to your analysis. How do you make them listen? How do you make them understand logic?

You don't. The secret to communicating technical topics to nontechnical audiences is for you to understand *them*. All too often, we spend time understanding and analyzing our technical material but invest little, if any, time in understanding the audience.

When you have only one chance and it needs to go well, use the secret of the four “Cs” to effectively communicate technical topics to nontechnical audiences:

- Clarity of purpose
- Context of the audience
- Conciseness of content
- Collaboration with your audience

## Clarity of Purpose

Briefings come in many forms. You may need to inform a group or seek specific action. Perhaps there is a decision to be made, or maybe you are there to listen. Whatever your purpose is, make sure you have clarity about it. That may seem obvious, but all too often, the meeting ends and the key players are left wondering, “What was the point?” Next time, before you walk in the door, know why you are there. What is your ideal outcome? What does success look like? What is the “ask”?

Don't sleepwalk through this step.

Seriously contemplate your purpose and desired outcome. Before you walk through the real or virtual door, think through the purpose until you distill it into a crystal-clear statement.

## Context of the Audience

It is easy to focus on the material, the facts, and the analysis. But, for an important presentation, you should dedicate substantial time to understanding the audience and their needs. Know their context, their concerns, and their comfort levels. Put yourself in their shoes and ask, “What's in it for me?” (WIFM). Spend time thinking about the audience. What do you know about the group's interests, fears, and history? What do you know about the political climate? What is the career trajectory and risk profile of the decision maker? What are the consequences of the decision? Is credibility, embarrassment, power, or an election at stake?

Imagine that you are briefing a decision maker about a major project design decision that incorporates a new technology approach. You know she likes to be on the cutting edge, and she wants to be viewed as an innovator. What are your key points? With what approach will you lead? Perhaps you can point out that this project is ideal for demonstrating this new technology. While the technology has been fully tested, this will be the first use of it in this specific application. There is already interest from other states to learn about the experience. This will be a high-profile project.

Now imagine that you are briefing a risk-averse decision maker about the

same project. In this case, what are your key points and your approach? This time, you may emphasize the level of testing that supports the new technology. You may focus on the previous applications where it has been used. You may emphasize the risk-management approaches that are in place to mitigate unforeseen issues.

In these two scenarios, your approaches are not the same. The project and the issue to be decided may be the same, but your approach and key points change based on the interests of the audience.

When we walk into the meeting armed only with facts and figures, we come across as tone deaf. Decision makers shake their heads and think, “They just don't get it.” And unless we know as much about our audience as we do about the topic, they are right.

## Conciseness of Content

Benjamin Franklin said, “I have already made this paper too long, for which I must crave pardon, not having now time to make it shorter.” Franklin was right: it takes time and effort to whittle a topic down to its essence. However, that is exactly what you must do. Earlier in my career, I gave many briefings to congressional staff and the secretary of transportation. If we were lucky, we had a half hour, but we frequently had less time. I quickly learned that it is essential to be crystal clear on the “ask,” understand the audience's WIFM, and be concise.

What is the *one* thing you want your audience to remember? Can you simply and easily explain that one thing

to a “regular” person? If you cannot, try again. Really. Try again. You also need to know how the people in your audience best consume information. You may love a great graph or infographic, but do they? Do they prefer a detailed PowerPoint deck or is a story better? Do they want you to get straight to the point or do they need background information? It’s your job to know and design your approach to fit their communication style. Hone the message, tighten the content, and make a clear point.

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### Collaboration with Your Audience

In every meeting, keep in mind that you are not presenting *to* your audience; you are communicating *with* them. Communication is a collaborative, two-way process. You must focus as much energy on understanding your audience’s concerns, answering their questions, and gauging their reactions as you spend trying to get your point across. It is good to hone your presentation skills, but how are your listening skills?

### Conclusion

When you must communicate technical topics effectively, make time to work on the four “Cs.” Shift your perspective to see your audience’s point of view and tailor your briefing to meet them where *they* are. Yes, this approach takes more effort. Yes, it takes time. But without attending to the four “Cs,” your strong technical work could be lost. **A**

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