Making the Most of Your Three Minutes

3MT: The Three Minute Thesis

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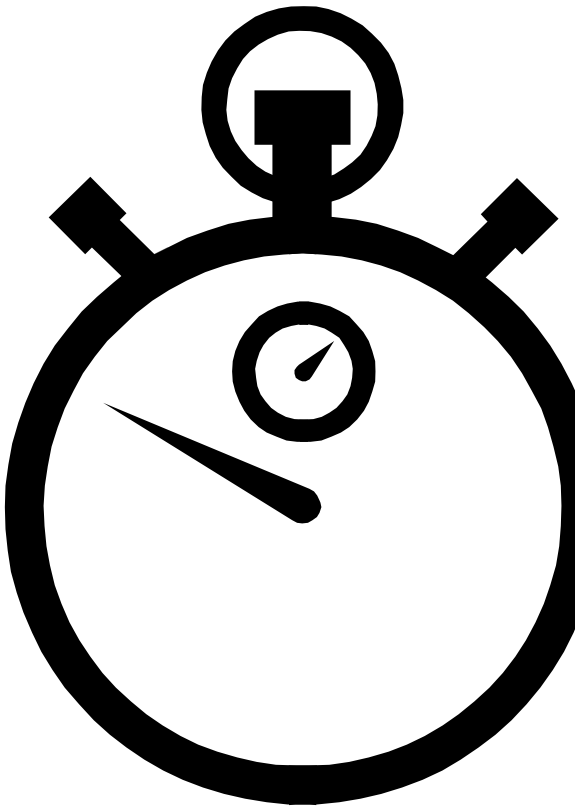

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Congratulations on deciding to have ago at the Three Minute Thesis competition – you will have an absolute ball, I am sure, and along the way you will acquire some extremely useful communication skills. If you can crystallise your years and years of intense study into three minutes that will captivate, entertain and educate a non-specialist audience, I'd say there isn't a grant you can't get or a job you can't secure. Good luck!

Your preparation for the 3MT should be divided into two phases: let's call them pre-production and performance. But before that there is one big question you might like to consider: do you want to tackle this on your own? 3MT can be a real challenge and you might like to think about assembling a pit crew – a group of friends who will give you honest and critical feedback ("great opening line, but the purple floral shirt sucks") as you progress through the competition. Just a thought – I'll leave that one with you.

And now on to 3MT glory ...

PRE-PRODUCTION

There are five factors over which you have varying degrees of control in the 'pre-production' phase. These are:

- the venue
- the technology
- the judges
- how you look
- how you sound

Let's take them one by one – the first three are elements with which you need to become familiar and the last two are elements over which you have total control. The main aim - particularly with the first three - is to become as familiar and comfortable with the situation in which you will be speaking as possible.

THE VENUE: You need to find out where each heat, semi-final or final is taking place and check out the venue before you actually take to the stage. If the first time you see a venue is when you arrive to speak there, you are not taking this seriously! Look at where you will stand, where your audience will sit,

where your slide will be projected and take note of the acoustics of the room. Become thoroughly familiar with the venue.

THE TECHNOLOGY: This is, as far as you are concerned, the microphone that you will use. Projection of your slide will be someone else's responsibility so you needn't worry about that. This is, again, an exercise in becoming familiar with the environment in which you will be performing. There are four possible microphone types you may be confronted with:

Static, wired, on a stand – just remember to keep your mouth six inches or so from the mike and not to move too far from it. While these types are not overly directional, if you move your head too far to one side, you will 'go off mike' and not be heard.

Wireless, hand-held (a.k.a. the ice-cream cone) – same distance rules apply, but it's very hard to go off mike with this one. However, just be aware that you'll lose one of your hands for gesturing in this situation so, if your presentation culminates with a version of the 'fish that got away was *this* big' story, you're in trouble, to put it mildly.

The bug, wired or wireless – the little bug-sized thing they pin on newsreaders, usually on a lapel or shirt collar. Just make sure you don't brush this one during your performance and avoid wearing dangly jewellery that could get tangled with it or, worse still, rub against it while you are speaking. Synthetic fibres can be a problem here, but let's just assume you have too much good taste to be seen out wearing nylon and you'll be fine.

The boom, over-the-ear, 'Madonna' mike – not a lot you can do if the venue uses these; if you have a choice say a polite 'no thank you,' but if you have to wear one, just try not to look too silly.

With all mikes - whether they are on a stand, in your hand, pinned to your clothes or over your ear – there are two golden rules: the first is - don't touch them! Ever!! This makes a horrible noise and looks unprofessional (there is nothing more amateurish that a public speaker can do than to walk up to the microphone stand and fiddle with it). Secondly, always assume all microphones are always 'on.' Many a politician has come to a sticky end by assuming a mike is off and I'd hate you to be overheard muttering unflattering comments about your judging panel. Not the best way to get a high score, I can assure you!

And there is, of course, the possibility that – particularly in a small heat – that you may not even have a microphone. In this situation, just make sure you speak clearly to the person in the back row.

THE JUDGES: Before you begin your heat you should find out who will be judging you. Universities are small places and chances are you will know or at least recognise the people judging you. There's not a lot more you can do about this factor – bribes, threats and coercion being generally frowned upon – but knowing who your judges will be is part of feeling totally comfortable with the situation when you do make your presentation.

HOW YOU LOOK: You might only be speaking to the audience and the judges for three short minutes, but for all intents and purposes you might as well be taking part in a one hour job interview. How you look is vitally important and can convey some very positive and equally some very negative messages

about you and your sense of professionalism. Find a friend and try staring at him or her for three minutes: you will be amazed at how much you see in that person and how many subliminal messages you receive from the way they are dressed and the way they look. Just as the suit and tie at the job interview convey that sense of professionalism that sends the message that you are the best person for the job, the right look for your three-minute pieces performance will convey very similar messages to the audience and, more importantly, the judges.

HOW YOU SOUND: Again, there are some very important subliminal messages conveyed in the way that you sound to your audience and your judges; if you need to warm up your vocal chords you should do this before the performance as you need to sound absolutely at your best from the moment you begin speaking. If your voice is even in the slightest bit croaky try any of the variations on good, old-fashioned honey and lemon or that favourite of opera singers - a small slug of brandy (just make sure you have gum or mints handy in this case – there's another subliminal message you don't want to be sending!). Clearing your throat or coughing during the performance - particularly a nervous cough - sends a very negative critical message to your audience and to your judging panel.

PERFORMANCE

Now we know how you are going to say it, let's look at what you are actually going to say during your all-important three minutes of fame - what we are going to call the 'performance.'

When you come to write the script for your three-minute thesis presentation it is absolute is vital that you remember that you are presenting to a non-specialist audience. Probably the best way to think of this audience is to imagine that they are just as intelligent as well-informed as you are, but that they haven't had time to do the research that you have. Crucially, this means not dumbing down your content and not patronising or condescending to your audience in any way whatsoever.

There are a few simple rules you should bear in mind when writing the script for your 3MT presentation, rules which also apply to pretty much any writing for a non-academic audience.

Writing for a non-specialist audience means ...

Using shorter words, shorter sentences and shorter paragraphs - if you aren't clear as to the impact of this sort of writing can have, just go and read any good journalism or even read a good writer of fiction like Ernest Hemingway - someone who is an absolute master at using shorter words in shorter sentences in short paragraphs to absolutely dynamic effect.

Choosing active verbs over passive verbs: when speaking to a non-specialist audience you should never hide behind the impassive verb - all those 'it is thought that', 'it is proposed that', 'it has been suggested that', etc. First of all you only have three minutes to get your message across and to use more words

than is necessary is basically a waste of time and, secondly, in the eyes of the non-specialist audience member, the impassive verb is tantamount to an act of linguistic cowardice - if you really think something, then at least have the guts to tell us that with two simple words – 'I think.'

Avoiding jargon, acronyms, etc. - the whole point of using jargon and acronyms is to enhance that sense of exclusivity which academia seems to thrive on. However, when you're speaking to a non-specialist audience there is nothing worse than projecting a sense of exclusivity through the use of jargon and acronyms. This is guaranteed to instantly turn that audience off so, when you're speaking to your 3MT audience, you need to be as inclusive as possible. So – wherever possible avoid anything that the general public might not understand and, if you can really find no alternative word, then qualify or explain what it is your are talking about.

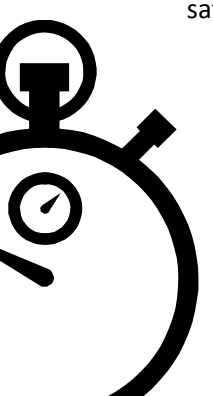
Qualifying unknown concepts, people, places, etc. - never make assumptions about your audience for a non-specialist presentation, particularly assumptions that they will automatically know what you are talking about. This is a classic academic trap –"I understand subject x and find it absolutely fascinating, therefore everyone understands subject x and finds it absolutely fascinating." WRONG! Not just wrong, but lazy too. With names, for example, there are very few people who are universally known; once you get past the Pope or the Queen or Michael Jackson or the Beatles or, at a pinch, Madonna, then anyone of lesser celebrity probably needs some sort of qualification when mentioned to a non-academic audience. So, you might know that Sir John Smith is the leading authority in your field, but the rest of us will almost certainly have never heard of him or his earth-shattering discoveries. This means you need to qualify him when you introduce him – Sir John Smith, one of the world's leading authorities on ... etc. Afterwards by all means namedrop as often as you like, but the first time around tell us who he is. The same goes for places, institutions, events, etc. – never assume we know what you are talking about because chances are we won't.

Avoiding 'academic' words – make sure you avoid using words that are specific to academia and which will not be understood by a non-specialist audience; 'discourse' is a classic academic word which has virtually no place in the non-academic world. While there is nothing wrong with using it in the academic context, as soon as you use a word like this in a non-specialist context, you potentially alienate your audience and, as a result, fail in your attempt to communicate to them. Essentially, if you use words like this, you might as well wave a big flag over your head that has 'wanker' written on it.

There are many, many different techniques you can use when writing for a non-specialist audience; here are just a few useful ideas to get you started ...

Make sure your presentation has a beginning, a middle and an end – after all you are telling a story and there is nothing more satisfying for an audience to listen to.

Think about a circular structure - a piece of writing that begins in one particular place, which then goes off in various directions tell a story but then ends up in the same place as it started is also a very satisfying structure.



Bring your piece to life – there is nothing like a few quotes or anecdotes to bring a piece of writing to life - even the most clinical, impersonal of subjects will have some relationship to the outside world if you look hard enough and a few words from those potentially affected by it will always bring a subject like this to life.

Include human interest – put some people into your story; again, even the most impersonal stories will by necessity have some relationship to the real world and the people that live in that world and any link that you can make to this world will bring the story closer to your audience.

Be aware of rhythm and pacing - there is actually a lot that can be learned from good stand-up comedy - the rhythm and pacing of a good story or joke told by a classy performer can actually give you great insights into how to address any audience. Watch how a great comedian builds up to and then delivers a punch line and imagine the effect you could have if you delivered your academic punch line with the same sense of pace, rhythm and timing.

Use humour .... but use it carefully; there is nothing like humour to bring even the most serious of subjects to life - one quick look at Shakespeare will show you how this can be done well - but make sure you use your humour carefully and make sure you're prepared to deliver it well. Don't forget that, if you do well in the competition, you may well end up telling the same story or reciting the same joke three or four times at various heats, semi-finals and eventually in the grand final. It takes a great performer to deliver a joke with spontaneity more than once so, if you do decide to bring humour - particularly jokes - into your presentation, just be sure that this is something you will be able to do well and that your humour won't come across as stale and fall flat the second time around.

Write too much and then cut back – distil, distil and distil again; it is always better to write six minutes worth of presentation and cut it back to three than to write two minutes worth and have to pad it out to three. Cutting back, distilling and crystallising your presentation will always make for something that is punchier, more dynamic and more effective.

Read out loud to yourself - the easiest way to ensure that your writing sounds good is to read it out loud to yourself. And this doesn't just apply to these 3MT, of course; the easiest way to spot any linguistic laziness or simply a poor turn of phrase is to read your writing out to yourself.

The 'hook' – this is a trick from journalism to get a reader involved in what you are saying – start with something that is of relevance to your audience to 'hook' them into your story. This can be something very personal, very emotive, very human. Have a look at the 3MT YouTube examples from 2010 and see how many of the speakers start with a 'hook' that builds a bridge between the everyday experience of the audience and the very academic material they are about to present. The word 'imagine' can be very useful here, as can a link that takes a seemingly clinical subject, but relates it to something that is part of everyone's lives. Have a look at the examples and see how knee injuries came to life courtesy of the World Cup.

The Slide

Now while you and your speech make up the majority of the presentation, you do have the luxury of having a slide projected behind you. Don't waste this opportunity - when preparing your slide, you need to think very carefully about what its function is and how it can support, and not detract from, your three minute presentation.

Essentially your slide is a backdrop for a performance. Think of it as a tiny, two dimensional theatrical set, if you like. It needs to work at a fairly visceral level – it certainly doesn't want to be competing with you in terms of information communication.

Again – a few ideas/hints that you can take in or ignore on when preparing your slide ...

"... and now a word from our sponsor ..." – while it is creditable that you want to acknowledge all the sponsors and supporters of your research project, your 3MT slide is not the place to be doing this. All that happens is that you end up with a very messy, overly busy slide that detracts from your overall presentation.

How much text is enough? How much is too much? This is a tricky question, but generally speaking very little text is what is required. Most of the text should be coming from your presentation and the text on the slide should just support this and act as a reminder of a few crucial points – your name, your topic and maybe one or two key phrases to reinforce the message - but very little more.

We can read your slide – you don't need to do it for us! It might sound obvious but it has been known for a speaker to read out loud the content of a slide that has far, far too much text on it. This is slightly less interesting than watching paint dry and should be avoided at all costs.

Less is more – a slide can be too busy. Think clean, clear images with minimal text typeset in a striking font. Probably the best slide I have ever seen was for a talk on a near-extinct language in Tibet. A beautiful image of a village in Tibet that bled all the way to edge of the slide simply bore the speaker's name and the presentation title in a clean, clear font in the bottom right hand corner – simple, dignified and highly effective.

The advantages and disadvantages of not having a slide – or, as I like to call it, the huge disadvantages of not having a slide. I have only seen this attempted once and it worked initially, but then backfired terribly thereafter. One presenter I saw thought they would make huge impact by – unlike everyone else – not using a slide at all. It worked the first time and even caused quite a ripple through the audience. However, the second time, the person operating the projector thought there had been a mistake so hastily advanced to the slide of the next speaker's slide and the time after that, even though a blank slide had been inserted into the sequence, the screen saver kicked in half way through the three minutes and the audience had to try and concentrate on the speech while the Microsoft logo swooped

around the screen. The moral of the story? It's a nice idea, but one which has the potential to backfire on you hugely. Use a slide!

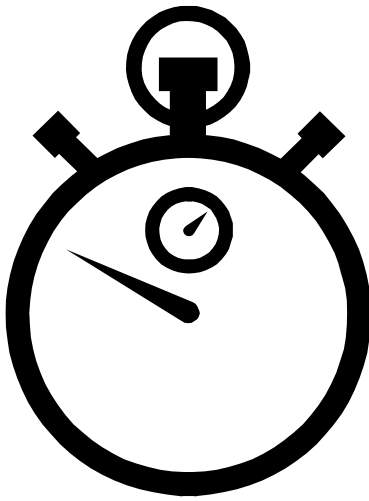
ROLE MODELS

So who should you be looking emulate when you present your three minute thesis? TV presenters (particularly from non-commercial stations), public speakers, commentators and public intellectuals, such as David Suzuki, Alain de Botton, Simon Schama and Stephen Fry are good examples, but I am sure you won't need to look far to find great examples of people who can speak well, accessibly and in a lively, intelligent and engaging manner.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Of course there are some definite 'NO-Nos' – some spelled out in the rules of the competition and some not.

Costumes – just dress as though you were going for a three minute job interview, OK? You don't need to dress any more than that. If the judges sense even the hint of a costume, out you go!



Props – same as costumes; a very big no-no in the rules. It's the power of your words and your oratory we are looking for, not your skills with a deck of cards or a baton!

Slide transitions – don't even think about it. Not even a tiny, sneaky automatic one. If your slide so much as changes one pixel – again: out you go!

Muttering – if we can't understand you, we can't give you a good mark, can we? Same 'job interview' rules apply – there is very little point in writing a magnificent speech if no-one can hear it. Speak up. And, if speaking up doesn't come naturally to you, practise!

Looking at the floor – eye contact is crucial here; an old speaker's trick is to aim to make eye contact with everyone in the audience (judges included) at least once during your speech. You'd be amazed how much more personal – and, therefore, effective – this makes your speech.

Sex, religion and politics – the three great dinner party conversation starters/stoppers. Just remember: you don't know anything about your audience's or your judges' belief systems, morals, ethics, standards,

etc., so raise these subjects at your own risk – you might get away with it with a dash of humour or as your 'hook,' but do it carefully. Very carefully.

"ums", "ahs" and "ers" – come on, people; you've only got three minutes! Get yourself a recorder (audio or video) and record yourself. Play it back and become aware of when you um and ah. Then practise, practise and practise until you have eliminated this.

Hands in pockets or hypergesticulation! Find the middle ground with your hands – don't tuck them away in your pockets as that looks unnatural, not to say slightly shifty, but equally avoid looking like an operatic tenor on steroids. Back to good on-screen talent such as foreign correspondents for that one, I think.

WHAT YOU ARE AIMING FOR

Confident	Humble	Authoritative
Calm	Genuine	In Control
Likeable	Credible	

REMEMBER …

Every good performance – even the most spontaneous looking ones – is the result of a great deal of careful preparation and an enormous amount of rehearsal.

You've only got three minutes …. so make every second count.

Good luck!

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