

Making the Most of Your Three Minutes

Simon Clews

Director

Writing Centre

The University of Melbourne

www.simonclews.com

<http://gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au/writingcentre/index.html>



MELBOURNE
SCHOOL OF
GRADUATE
RESEARCH

Writing Centre
for Scholars and Researchers



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...

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,



Wireless, hand-held (a.k.a. the ice-cream cone)—same distance rules apply, but it's very hard to go off



(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.

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.

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 you are talking about.

Qualifying unknown concepts, people, places, etc—you and your audience should both be clear on what you are talking about.



Use humour



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.



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 every one in the room. (d)-1(y)3(o)-1r i)-3(f)-3(s)-4()-1(c)-0 Td(y)3

