

Refining for Presentation

Identifying Unknowns and Filtering for Simplicity

One of the most difficult aspects of preparing a presentation is anticipating your audience and deciding what level of complexity is appropriate for your remarks. Because this requires that you make a lot of assumptions (assumptions about what your audience will or won't already know; assumptions about what they will or won't be able to understand; assumptions about what will interest them; assumptions about why they are listening to you in the first place), it is important to be able to speak on your topic at different levels of complexity and leverage different kinds of hooks in order to justify the importance of your ideas.

The Feynman Technique for Learning Presenting Anything¹

The Feynman Technique, named after Richard Feynman (a physicist known for frequenting strip clubs and being very good at explaining difficult concepts to general audiences) begins with the premise that an inability to explain something is correlated with an incomplete understanding of it. In order to figure out where your presentation will falter, it is important to understand where your knowledge is lacking—or, at the very least, where you have trouble easily explaining the topic without relying on your audience to push you over the finish line.

Step 1a: Write the name of your concept/topic at the top of a blank piece of paper.

Step 1b: Imagine your audience—or try to imagine multiple audiences. What would you need to explain to a peer, to a child, to a congressperson, to someone in your field, etc.? Underneath your topic, briefly describe the level of expertise that you expect your audience to have.

Step 2: Using plain language (that is, steering clear of jargon and explaining necessary related concepts) try to describe your concept/topic/argument as best as you can. Set a timer for yourself (maybe 5 minutes) and don't stop writing until the timer expires.

Step 3: Highlight aspects of your explanation that are incomplete. Where there aspects of your explanation that seemed difficult to convey? If you compare your answer to other sources (maybe textbooks, lecture notes, or essays you've written) is there significant material lacking from your explanation? If so, go back to those materials and refresh your understanding of the topic. Re-write your general, 5 minute explanation as needed for practice.

Step 4: Check your word choice and phrasing. Are there aspects of your explanation that your imagined audience wouldn't understand?

A blank page has been provided on the back of this worksheet for you to practice using the Feynman Technique.

¹ Adapted from Matty Ford, "The Feynman Technique Model," <https://mattyford.com/blog/2014/1/23/the-feynman-technique-model>