

"If you don't have something to say, then don't say anything. Joel Schwartzberg takes that simple edict and turns it into a manifesto for giving talks that make a difference." —SETH GODIN, AUTHOR OF *LINCHPIN: ARE YOU INDISPENSABLE?*

Get to the Point!

*Sharpen Your
Message and
Make Your
Words Matter*

JOEL SCHWARTZBERG



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—**Hari Sreenivasan, Anchor and Senior Correspondent, *PBS NewsHour***

“Joel Schwartzberg’s step-by-step guide will help you find your point, hone it, and deliver it powerfully.”

—**Mark Ragan, CEO, Ragan Communications**

“If every speaker absorbed the contents of this wee volume, every speech would be a vital speech.”

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“The strategies will force you to rethink every presentation and help you make your point more effectively. I loved it.”

—**Fauzia Burke, President, FSB Associates, and author of *Online Marketing for Busy Authors***



Get to the Point!

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Sharpen Your Message and
Make Your Words *Matter*

JOEL SCHWARTZBERG



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*Dedicated to the hundreds of students and clients who
came to me with soft ideas and left with sharp points.*



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If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.

—Albert Einstein

Introduction

When I was in sixth grade, I gave one of my first formal speeches. Wearing a blue three-piece suit and wide clip-on tie, I competed at a forensics tournament and gave a speech about the neutron bomb, a now-obsolete device designed to minimize property destruction while maximizing human destruction through radiation.

I know, fun stuff for an 11-year-old.

When asked what my speech was about, I simply said, “The neutron bomb.” It was a classic book report: lots of information about what I cheekily called an “explosive” issue, yet it took no position on the issue whatsoever.

I think about that speech often—not just because it was the beginning of a thrilling competitive journey I would continue for the next 11 years—but because it also represents the biggest mistake people make in public communication: sharing information, but not selling a point.

I see that little me in many of my students and clients: important and talented people with critical things to say,

yet who deliver simple “who, what, where” book reports, or simply ramble with no clear direction.

These are salespeople who never say, “This product will increase your profits,” activists who never say, “This approach will save lives,” designers who never say, “This style will inspire interest,” and business leaders who never say, “This system will make us more efficient.”

One could wave an accusing finger at our educational system, our media models, even our parenting styles, but I’m less interested in *why* people are making too many speeches and too few points; I’m more interested in helping them identify and successfully convey their points.

I ended my competitive public speaking career with a national championship in 1990, and what I learned during that time and even more since then is this: no matter who you are, how you’re communicating, or who you’re communicating with, you benefit tremendously from having a point. After all, without one, everything you say is pointless.

No one is better qualified or equipped to make your specific points than you are, so I hope this book elevates your ability to effectively champion your ideas.





1

The Big Flaw

In more than ten years as a strategic communications trainer, I've seen one fatal presentation flaw more often than any other. It's a flaw that contributes directly to nervousness, rambling, and, ultimately, epic failure, and most speakers have no idea that this flaw is ruining their presentations:

They don't have a point.

They have what they think is a point, but it's actually something much less.

And here's the deal:

- ▶ You have to have a point to make a point.
- ▶ You have to have a point to sell your point.
- ▶ You have to have a point to stay on point.

Many articles about public presentation shallowly advise you to “have a clear point” or “stick to your topic” but leave it at that. Nowhere have I seen the critical missing piece: how to *formulate* an actual point and *convey it effectively*. It’s like a nutritionist simply telling you to “eat well,” then handing you a bill. Good luck with that.

The stakes couldn’t be higher. Simply put, without a point, you don’t know what you’re talking about. What you end up with—and what we see so often now in many different settings—is too many people making speeches and not enough people making points.

Once a presenter has a point, the next most important job is to effectively deliver it.

What do I mean by *effectively*? Simple: If the point is received, the presenter succeeds. If the point is not received, the presenter fails—regardless of any other impression made.

As you read this, you’re probably imagining a classic public speaker in front of a packed audience. But the truth is, every time you communicate, there’s always a potential point. Whether you’re giving a conference keynote speech or a Monday morning status report, talking to your mother or your manager, composing an email or creating a PowerPoint, having a real point is critical to getting what you most want from that interaction.

This book will help you make the most of those moments by showing you how to identify your point, leverage it, nail it, stick to it, and sell it. It’ll also show you how to overcome

presentational anxiety and train others to identify and make their own points.

Of course, knowing you need a point is useless if you don't know what a point is . . . and most people don't. Let's start with the basics, kicking off with a famous "I believe."



I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.



2

Know Your Point

We all know a thing or two about points. After all, we refer to points all the time:

“Get to your point!”

“What’s your point?”

“Please stick to your point.”

Yet all too often, people confuse a point with something else: a theme, a topic, a title, a catchphrase, an idea. We believe a good speech can simply be about supply-side economics, the benefits of athleticism, the role of stepmothers, or the summer you spent in Costa Rica.

But none of these are actual points.

Imagine a child's history paper on the American Revolution. If you asked him for his point, he might say it's about the American Revolution.

That's a topic.

He might also say it's about George Washington and the Founding of America.

That's a title.

He might even say it's about the role of perseverance in American history.

That's a theme.

But a point is unique.

A point is a contention you can propose, argue, defend, illustrate, and prove.

A point makes clear its value and its purpose.

And to maximize impact, a point should be sold, not just shared or described.

So what does a true point look like? It should look something like this:

A politician's point: "My plan will expand home-buying opportunities for the middle class."

A CEO's point: "This investment in R&D will ensure our company continues to stay relevant."

A vendor's point: "My unique services will make you more profitable."

An advocate's point: "This movement will save lives."

A job interviewee's point: "I will help your department accomplish its goals."

A mother's point: "Saving that money now means you'll be able to buy something even bigger later."

A surefire way to know if you have a real point—and successfully create one—is to apply a simple three-step test, followed by two bonus "point-enhancers":

Step One: The "I Believe That" Test

Step Two: The "So What" Test

Step Three: The "Why" Test

Enhancement One: Avoiding Split Ends

Enhancement Two: Adding a Value Proposition

These steps are the bread-and-butter of this book, so you may want to find your highlighter and take breaks to apply these recommendations to your own points and subpoints. The best way to learn these tips is to apply them right away.

Step One: The "I Believe That" Test

This is a pass/fail test, and it boils down to this:

Can your point fit into this phrase to form a complete sentence?

"I believe that _____."

For example, you can't say, "I believe that the American Revolution." Or "I believe that George Washington and

the Founding of America.” Or even “I believe that the role of perseverance in American history.” These are fragments, not complete sentences, and your fifth-grade English teacher would not be happy.

But you can say, “I believe the American Revolution gave our country an enduring democratic identity.”

Some more grown-up examples:

You can’t say, “I believe that innovations in IT.”

But you can say, “I believe that innovations in IT will make us more efficient.”

You can’t say, “I believe income inequality.”

But you can say, “I believe income inequality is America’s biggest domestic challenge.”

You can’t say, “I believe that investing in infrastructure.”

But you can say, “I believe that investing in infrastructure is the best way to prepare for our future.”

Try this test right now with a point you occasionally make or might make to your colleagues, boss, or potential clients. Then see if what you thought was your point was really something else.

Once your point passes the “I Believe That” Test, move on to Step Two. If it’s not quite there yet, keep working at it until your “I believe that” is grammatically sound. If you need inspiration, read some of the “I Believe” statements that separate the chapters in this book.



Step Two: The “So What” Test

The “So What” Test roots out points that pass the “I Believe That” test but may be too shallow to serve as the foundation of a meaningful presentation. These weak points are often truisms. A *truism*, by definition, is inarguably true, so there’s no use proposing one, whether your point is that “world peace is a good thing” or “ice cream is delicious.”

You might also call this the “duh” test.

You can tell if your point is too shallow or a truism by asking two questions: “Is there a reasonable counterpoint?” and “Can I spend more than a minute defending this point?”

More point-focused versions of those earlier examples could be “Ice cream is always a better dessert than frozen yogurt” and “The United Nations is critical to preserving world peace.”

These are points that can be argued with support from logic, data, or case studies.

Being able to distinguish between a shallow argument and a substantive one is crucial to making a meaningful point.

Now let’s put Steps One and Two together.

Example One:

“The 2016 Election” = Not a point

(Funks the “I Believe That” Test)

“The 2016 Election was a huge news event.” = Not a point

(Passes the “I Believe That” Test, but it’s too shallow—there’s no counterpoint.)

“The 2016 Election changed the conventional rules of running for President.” = A point!

(Passes the “I Believe That” Test and requires analysis to make the case)

Example Two:

“Facebook’s new privacy features” = Not a point

(Funks the “I Believe That” Test)

“Facebook has new privacy features.” = Not a point

(Passes the “I Believe That” Test, but it’s clearly true.)

“Facebook’s new privacy features substantially protect their users.” = A point!

(Passes the “I Believe That” Test, and it’s something worth contending.)

Almost every professional communication—and even most personal ones—can be improved by highlighting a point. A student once challenged me on this by suggesting that the person who introduces speakers or simply welcomes an audience doesn’t have a point.

Indeed, “Introducing Samantha Speaker” isn’t a point.

But “Samantha Speaker’s ideas will help us become more effective project managers” certainly is.

“Hello and welcome!” isn’t a point.

But “The learnings from this conference will make your Human Resources processes more efficient” certainly is.

By this time, you probably have a usable and substantive point—imagine it as the tip of a #2 pencil. But ask yourself this: is it the sharpest point possible? The answer to that will come from Step Three.

Step Three: The “Why” Test

The “Why” Test is crucial to ensure you’re not using meaningless adjectives—what I call “badjectives.” These are generic adjectives that only add dead weight to your point.

Compare these two columns of adjectives:

Column 1	Column 2
Excellent	Urgent
Great	Profitable
Wonderful	Efficient
Amazing	Unprecedented
Very Good	Galvanizing

The adjectives on the left are nearly worthless in comparison to the ones on the right. When we say something is “great” or “very good,” there’s little indication of scale, reason, or specific meaning. Yet speeches and written reports—and more than a few Tweets—are often loaded with badjectives.



If you're using badjectives, or have a suspicion you are, start the correction by saying your fully realized point aloud.

Next, ask yourself: "Why?" and answer that question.

Example One:

I believe hiring a social media manager is important.

(Why?)

Because she can help us build positive buzz around our product.

Now eliminate the badjective "important," and connect the first part ("I believe hiring a social media manager . . . ") directly to the last part (" . . . can help us build positive buzz around our product."):

I believe a social media manager can build critical buzz around our product.

Example Two:

I believe our marketing strategy is weak.

(Why?)

Because it focuses too much on product benefits and not enough on customer needs.

Like in the previous example, connect the first part directly to the last part, eliminating the badjective "weak":

I believe our marketing strategy focuses too much on product benefits and not enough on customer needs.

Audit your presentation materials constantly to root out badjectives and replace them with more meaningful adjectives.

Better yet, don't use an adjective at all and make the point through example.

For example:

Not Good:

“Adopting this protocol will be great for our company.”

Good:

“Adopting this protocol will be very productive for our company.”

Better:

“Adopting this protocol will allow our operations to run more efficiently.”

All points, but which makes the strongest case to you?

Using badjectives is like when a Little League coach says “Come on now, Johnnie!” versus “Keep your eye on the ball as it comes to you, Johnnie!” One has little-to-no value, whereas the other makes a useful point.

Remember: You don't want to be your point's cheerleader; you want to be its champion.

Enhancement One: Avoiding Split Ends

Often, a speaker will sneak two or more points into one using “split ends”:

I believe moving our files to the cloud will (1) improve our carbon footprint and (2) make us more efficient.

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