

How to Address the Different Learning Styles of Your Audience

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The Sage on the Stage

Being asked to present a paper at an academic conference can be a great honor. You are finally being recognized as an expert in your field, based on your research, publications, or both.

In the glaring spotlight of all this attention, it can be tempting to channel all of your efforts into delivering a “knock your socks off” performance, presenting your data in the most dazzling manner possible—Hollywood-quality video, Pixar-level animation, top quality graphics, etc.

Before you go down that expensive road, stop, slap yourself in the face (gently please!) and remember one critical rule about making presentations: It's Not About You!

For your presentation to reach the majority of the audience, and to achieve the full [transformative effect](#) that you sincerely hope it will, the emphasis must be switched from you to the needs of that audience.

People Learn Differently

To be truly effective, your presentation must acknowledge the fact that the audience has different learning styles. Only then will you receive the positive feedback and glowing accolades that you fully intend to earn.

But then it's highly unlikely that you'll be able to survey your audience members [in advance](#) so as to know their individual preferred learning styles. It's, therefore, best to improvise by incorporating different modalities in your presentation.

What is a Learning Style?

Your individual audience members will have preferred methods for learning and gaining knowledge. The most commonly used learning style model is the [Visual Auditory Kinesthetic \(VAK\) Model](#) that proposes that most people possess a dominant learning style:

1. Visual—learn through seeing, think in pictures and images. They will often say: “the way I see it is.”
2. Auditory—learn through listening, think in words. They prefer to talk through a process before reading about it: “I hear what you are saying.”
3. Kinesthetic—learn through action, touching, movement/interaction

How Does This Relate to Your Content?

Preferred learning styles are not exclusive—visual learners can still learn through listening, but for a presentation [to connect with an audience](#), there are specific steps you can take:

- Visual learners respond to facial expressions and body language and learn best from pictures, tables, and charts. Written instructions with images in your conference handout will help them learn best.
- Auditory learners respond to voice tone, pitch, and speed. They would appreciate access to an audio recording or being allowed to record the session for later review. They will typically be active participants in the [Q&A session](#) at the end of your presentation, if only to confirm what they heard.
- Kinesthetic learners can be the toughest to help in conference presentations because they prefer to learn through role-playing, practice demonstrations, and activities.

Acknowledging different learning styles in your presentation may not win you a higher rating from the audience as a whole, but you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you reached out to as many people as you could.

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