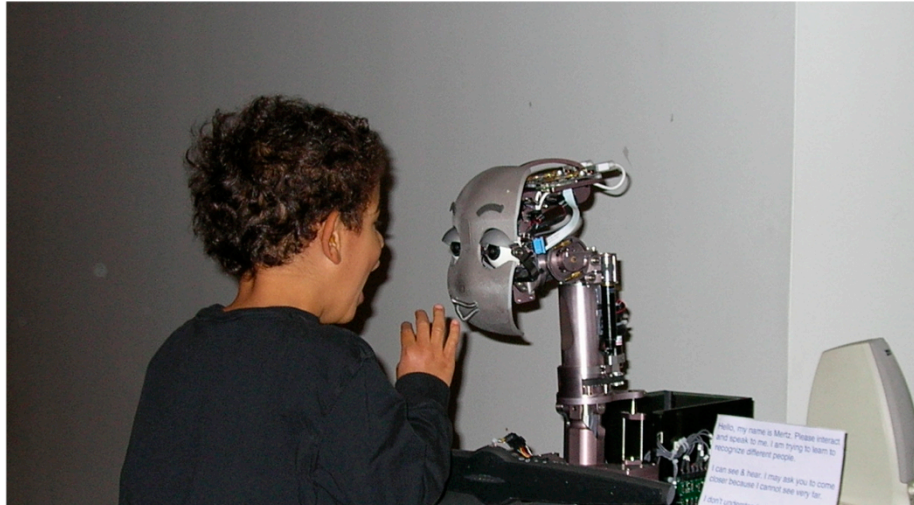


# Coaching Session for Grand Challenge Presentations

Mary Caulfield  
RSS Spring 2011  
April 8, 2011

This session covers general notes from the dry runs and is a chance for you to ask questions about next week's presentations. Overall, the dry-run presentations were very high quality. Having all the information in place is just a starting point, however, for the final decisions you will need to make about content, emphasis, and timing. Considering your audience and its needs will help you set priorities. When you care about content, cutting back is never fun. But setting priorities and looking at the role of information will help you make decisions.

## Who Is Your Audience?



Think about your relationship to your audience. What do you know about them? What do you need to tell them? What kind of response do you expect? (Or fear?)

## Who Is Your Audience?

- What do you assume about them?
- How are they going to respond to you?
  - Do they know you?
  - Do you need to impress them?
- What do you want them to walk away with?
  - Ideas?
  - Actions?

Take a minute and brainstorm some answers. Know what you the audience needs to take away. Are you just conveying information? Or would you like to elicit a particular response?

## Classical Story Structure as Framework

- Stasis
- Initiating Incident
- Rising Action
- Climax
- Resolution
- Denouement

This is Aristotle's classical structure of the story. It's also a helpful "shape" for presentations.

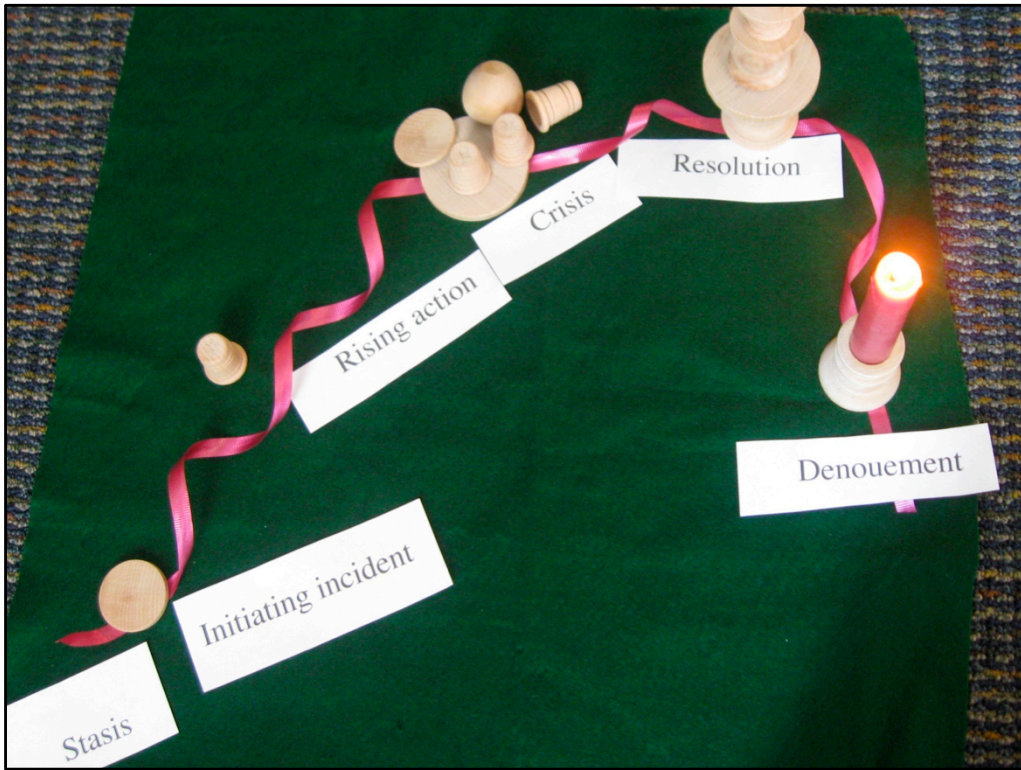
Some recommended reading:

Story Structure - Robert McKee (Harper Collins)

The Craft of Research, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition – Booth, Williams, and Colomb (University of Chicago Press)

Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work or Play – Doug Lipman (August House)

These are just three of many books you could read on these topics, but they all boil down complex ideas into concepts that are easy to remember. These ideas aren't new, of course. But when you are looking at the slides and your content, it's helpful to weigh the content against your available time. Imposing a structure on your talk helps you make decisions. You can ask, "What piece of the story does each slide represent?"



The classical story has an arc. The elements do not each receive the same amount of space. We focus on the pieces that are the most intriguing. A story often does not end when the problem is solved; the denouement sheds light on the other pieces and makes us see them in new ways.

## Classical Story Structure as Framework

### Story Structure (Aristotle)

- Stasis
- Initiating Incident
- Rising Action
- Climax
- Resolution
- Denouement

### Technical/Scientific “Story” (Williams, Booth & Colomb)

- Once we thought...
- But then we observed...
- So we wondered...
- Then we tried...
- Which showed us...
- And we concluded...

What does all this have to do with technical and scientific presentations? Booth, Williams, and Colomb present the model of an introduction as a story. The introductory and transitional words may be somewhat different, but we can use this framework to approach ideas at a high level. Although the high-level view may seem oversimplified, you can use this very schematic summary of your work to connect each detail to the whole.

## What Story are You Telling?

- Chart the arc of the story
- Allocate time for each segment
- Identify the Most Important Thing (Doug Lipman's MIT)
- Map your time
- Set milestones to address key points within the allocated time

Constraining your story to these main points can help you to see what information the audience needs in order to get that “take-away idea.” To manage your presentation time, set priorities. Imagine you had only three minutes. What would you absolutely have to tell your audience. Focus on that key idea. When you consider the amount of time you actually have, ask how much information is absolutely necessary to set up the idea. Set your time goals: “By minute X of our talk, we want to reach point Y.” I visualize an analog clock face and think of my topics as wedges of pie. My Most Important Thing (a term coined by storyteller Doug Lipman) is usually about 60-75% of my talk. Knowing that, I allow some time for relating to the audience, a bit of time to introduce and set goals, and I aim to make my central points about 8-10 minutes into the hour.

## What Story are You Telling?

### To arrive at:

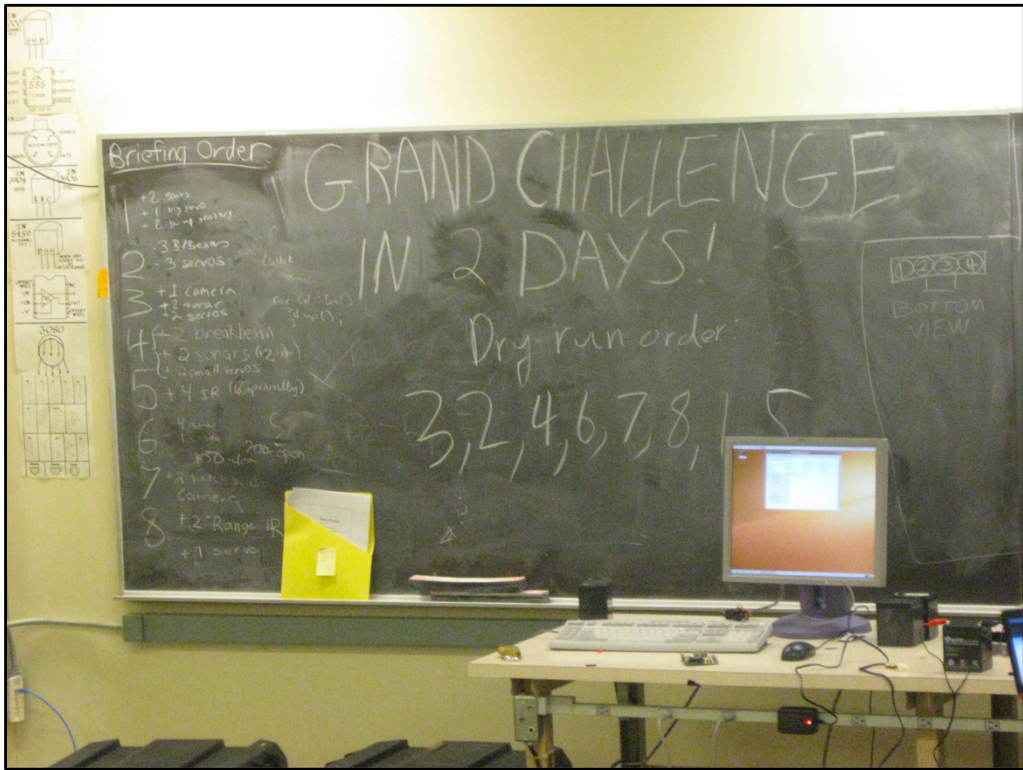
- Arc of story
- Allocation of time
- Lipman's MIT
- Map of time
- Milestones

### Ask yourself:

- Where are stakes the highest?
- Can I show (rather than tell) context?
- What *must* we say?
- What % is high-stakes information?
- How long will it take to reach my MIT?

With the solid presentations you all have, you can do some analysis of your content and set time goals. Presentation time is often cut short at conferences and seminars, so knowing how to set priorities helps you to edit. Throwing out vital information is never fun, but every speaker has to do it – frequently. Plan a fallback strategy. If you were actually delivering this talk to clients, students, or funders, what would you do to supplement or reinforce your message? A brochure? Supplemental slides for the Q&A session? A summary sheet? A video on your web site? Knowing you have another way of communicating can also help you let go of details that are intriguing and important, but don't fit the time allotted.





Good luck! Get in touch with us ([jconnor@mit.edu](mailto:jconnor@mit.edu) or [mcaulf@mit.edu](mailto:mcaulf@mit.edu)) if you have questions.