



# How to Make a Boring Subject **Interesting**

**52 ways even a nerd can be heard**

**GENI WHITEHOUSE**

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Published by Upton and Blanding Associates, Pleasanton, CA,  
[www.uptonblanding.com](http://www.uptonblanding.com)

Cover Design and Layout: Adina Cucicov

Editor: Amy Moore, [www.moorewords.com](http://www.moorewords.com)

Illustrations: Mary Patterson, [www.fishchild.com](http://www.fishchild.com)

ISBN: 978-0-692-00151-6

First Printing 2009, Printed in the United States of America.

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## Dedication

*In memory of Susan Sheridan Austin,  
the best presenter I have ever known.*

**and**

*To Chip and Mary Beth who have spent  
most of their lives fruitlessly trying  
to de-nerdify their Mom but who manage  
to support and inspire me anyway.*



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## How to Make a Boring Subject Interesting

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# INTRODUCTION



No subject is boring to *everyone*.

Likewise, no subject is inherently interesting to everyone. Rather, it's about the relationship between the communicator and the listener.

The secret to communication and presentation success lies in finding a subject that is interesting to you and making it interesting to your audience.

That's what this book is about.

This book is for presenters who want to have more fun with their material, who want to find a way to connect with their audience, who want to be heard.

Often presenters who are saddled with boring subjects get labeled boring by virtue of association. That's what has happened to entire professions like accounting, actuarial science, and funeral management.

But it doesn't have to be the case. This book will help you find and create the interesting in every subject.

The boring versus interesting call is pretty subjective. There is no procedural checklist you can follow every time.

There are lots of elements involved in good communication and when any one of them is missing, you can quickly slip into boring territory.

## How to Make a Boring Subject Interesting

Sometimes it's a timing thing. (*Ever been to a networking event immediately following your arrival on a red-eye flight? Nothing anyone says is going to keep you awake for long.*)

Other times it's a delivery issue. (*The presenter speaks in a monotone.*) It could be a matter of failing to meet expectations or providing too much information. (*I thought this was a 30 minute show—you mean I have to tune in next week to see the conclusion?*)

Or it could be that your audience is full of beginners and your material is advanced. (*I wanted to learn how to tune an engine, not build one.*)

Your goal, if you are the presenter, is to find out as much as you can about your audience and create a presentation that is perfectly suited to them.

Every subject is interesting to *somebody*. I am sure there is at least one person who is interested in the gestation period of an armadillo. (Actually, according to Google there are about 11,700 people interested enough in this topic to mention it.) But, there is an element of luck in finding a second person who is interested in that same subject.

When you want your message to reach more than three people, it's time to get serious. It's time to read this book.

This book focuses on the message. There are plenty of other great books on presenting that you should read too. (See the appendix.)

## Introduction

But this book, the one written lovingly for you by this nerd, will take you through 11 different areas that influence the power of your message.

It includes 52 ideas to help you find new sources of inspiration and new ways to organize your material. Some of the tips might even get you to take a risk, to be more edgy than you've been in the past. Before you're through, you might even discover that you enjoy making presentations.

**You might be wondering why I chose to write this book for nerds.**

In High School, I lettered in Algebra II. (You think I'm kidding.)

I am a nerd. When you are a nerd, there are only a couple of career options. So of course I became an accountant. During the course of my career, one of the things I have learned is that people in business rely on us nerds.

In fact, there is a nerdy engine that powers most successful businesses. Business owners need accountants. Salespeople need engineers. Software vendors need software developers. Wineries need wine makers. Drug companies need chemists. Astronauts need NASA engineers to put them in orbit. Occasionally, we might even need to consult with a medical professional who specializes in say, spasmodic dysplasia.

The point is that anyone who is immersed in a unique specialty is what I would consider a “nerd” at least in that subject, and they probably have valuable insights to share with the rest of us.

This book is about helping them find their voice.

## WHERE TO BEGIN?

*As Far Away From Your  
Computer As Possible*





## Where to Begin?

Most writers will tell you that they hate to face the blank page. And it's no wonder. It's easy to feel paralyzed at the beginning of a project.

The white screen or page is like a mirror for your brain: completely devoid of thoughts. The flashing cursor is a menacing little bug. If it had a voice it would be saying, *“Take a break. Do something else. I hate this. I'd like a donut.”*

That's why I like to redefine the beginning. When you're preparing for a presentation, don't expect to open up a blank slide deck and just start typing.

Start somewhere else. Your first steps don't necessarily involve a forced lock-down in your chair running through all of the facts that relate to your presentation.

The best ideas come to me when I'm away from the topic. I spend a little bit of time consciously thinking about the parameters of the problem, and then I leave it alone for a while.

Sometimes I even start in the middle. There might be one really amazing idea, insight, or image that jumps right out from the middle of my subject and then I am able to add content before and after that.

As I am out and about, I'm better able to put myself in the place of the audience. I always get inspiration on airplanes—probably because they're the only place you don't get interrupted by one of those marvels of modern technology.

## How to Make a Boring Subject Interesting

So give yourself time to ponder. Start by focusing on the idea, the emotion, or the reason you are making a presentation. Then follow these tips before you try to create your slides, script or handouts.



## **Create a one-pager.**

*And I'm not talking about one of those nerdy devices you have clipped to your belt.*



## Where to Begin?

If you can describe all of the pertinent information about your subject on one piece of paper, then you can turn it into a presentation. Just start writing. Don't try to edit yourself at the beginning.

Your goal is to create what Betsy Burroughs likes to call "a lousy first draft."<sup>1</sup> Then you can start playing with your content to create a one-page document.

If you haven't tried to do this, particularly on your favorite subject, you'll be surprised to learn how difficult it is to condense everything that you want to say onto one page.

But the exercise of dumping all of your information on paper and then editing it down to a single page is extremely valuable. It will really help you choose the correct words and will give you great clarity around what information is most vital to your message.

Once you have the one-pager, you have the option of adding details to form an informative handout, or paring it down further to form the basis of your presentation. Which conveniently leads me to my next point.

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<sup>1</sup> Betsy Burroughs, [www.focuscatalyst.com](http://www.focuscatalyst.com), author of *FOCUS. The Catalyst for Creativity. In your work. In your life.*