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## PEOPLE LEARN BEST IN 20-MINUTE CHUNKS

When I am coaching and mentoring people on presentations, I almost always recommend that they watch some TED talks. If you aren't familiar with TED talks, go to [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com) and watch some. These are short talks by accomplished people in their fields. Most of these people don't earn their living making presentations, but all of the presentations are very interesting. You can learn a lot about effective presentations by watching TED talks.

What's interesting too about TED talks is that most of them are 20 minutes long. I think that's one reason why they are so effective. These same presentations stretched out to an hour might not be quite so brilliant.

In fact, it turns out that 20 minutes is an ideal amount of time for a presentation. Maureen Murphy tested this idea in an experiment. She had adults attend a 60-minute presentation at work. She then tested to see the difference in memory and reaction to a talk given in one 60-minute presentation versus the same talk given in 20-minute segments with short breaks in between. Dr. Murphy found that the people enjoyed the 20-minute chunked presentations more, learned more information immediately after, and retained more information a month later.

### PLAN YOUR PRESENTATION FOR 20-MINUTE SEGMENTS

Based on this research, try to plan your presentation in 20-minute chunks. See if you can build in some kind of change every 20 minutes. For maximum learning, what you want is a break every 20 minutes, as opposed to just a change of topic. The best ways to accomplish this are:

- ★ Instead of taking one long break, take several short ones. For example, it is common for a half-day workshop to go from 9 to 11:30 or 9 to 12 with one 20- to 30-minute break at around 10:30. Instead of one 30-minute break, have one 15-minute break and then three short 5-minute breaks.
- ★ When I am presenting, I sometimes introduce short "stretch" breaks that are anywhere from 2 to 5 minutes in length. I just announce, "Let's take a short 3-minute stretch break." I time these to fall in 20-minute intervals.

- ★ If you have activities, exercises, or interactions, plan them at 20-minute intervals. Although they are not true breaks, they allow people to assimilate the information just presented.
- ★ If you are presenting for more than one hour, you probably have a break planned. Time the break so that it comes at one of these 20-minute periods.

### Takeaways

- \* Think about how you can chunk your presentation into segments that are no longer than 20 minutes.
- \* Plan an exercise or activity to fall at the 20-minute mark.
- \* Take multiple short breaks rather than one long break.

My daughter had trouble learning math in school. My son, who is older, was pretty much a math whiz, and I can hold my own through algebra and geometry, so the fact that my 8-year-old daughter was struggling with basic concepts like subtraction was a mystery.

One day after school she was in my office. She was working on her math homework and was obviously struggling. She was trying to do the adding and subtracting with her fingers, as she always did, and all of a sudden a light bulb went on in my head—"Oh, maybe she's a kinesthetic learner!" I happened to have sets of colored pens on a table in my office, so I started giving her addition and subtraction problems with the pens. I would literally hand her five blue pens and then two green pens and ask her how many pens she had all together. Or I'd give her ten pens of various colors, tell her to give me two green pens, and then ask her how many pens she had left. She was able to do the addition and subtraction as long as she could manipulate the pens.

### ARE LEARNING STYLES FACT OR FICTION?

I'm going out on a limb here, because the whole idea of learning styles is controversial. Some educators say the concept of learning styles is extremely valuable, and some cognitive scientists say that there isn't any research to back it up. It's true that there is not a lot of research for the idea, but my review of the literature and the controversy surrounding the claims has brought me to the conclusion that we haven't figured out exactly what learning styles are and that we haven't figured out how to research them. Future research may prove me wrong, but I'm going to say that there is something to the idea that people have preferred learning styles.

### THE VAK MODEL OF LEARNING STYLES

The learning-style model I think is most valuable is the Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic (VAK) model. The idea is that each individual has a learning mode that works best for them. Some people learn material best when it is presented in a visual form—for example, a drawing or diagram. Some people learn best when the material is presented by someone talking (auditory), and some people learn best when they literally do something with their body—for example, move around or manipulate objects. Everyone uses all three styles, but people often have a style that is best for them. For example, I suspected my daughter was a kinesthetic learner because she learned best by manipulating objects such as the pens or by counting on her fingers.



### No reliable or valid way to measure

I tried to find some measures of VAK that have been proven to be valid and reliable, but I haven't been able to find any. (This is probably one reason why the research is so inconclusive—researchers haven't figured out a good tool to measure individuals on which style is best.) Right now, we're all going on anecdotal measures and evidence.

### YOU TEND TO TEACH THE STYLE YOU ARE MOST COMFORTABLE WITH

One of the most powerful examples of learning styles I've ever witnessed was when I was taking David Meier's Accelerated Learning workshop. In the workshop, Meier demonstrated the power of the VAK model with an exercise. He proceeded to teach a short section on parallel versus serial computer processing.



### A good book on the VAK model

A practical book on VAK is *Differentiation through Learning Styles and Memory*, by Marilee Sprenger.

First he talked about the difference, then he showed a picture with an illustration, and then he broke the class in half. One half formed a line of dancers all kicking together (parallel processing), and the other half snaked through the room in a conga line (serial processing). My reaction was that this was all very interesting, but I had understood the concept back at step one when he talked about it. Then David asked the class, "How many of you understood the difference between parallel and serial processing when I just talked about it?" I raised my hand, with about one-third of the class. "How many of you didn't understand until you saw the picture?" About half of the class raised their hands. "How many of you didn't understand until you did the dance?" The rest of the class raised their hands.

It was a powerful lesson for me. My preferred learning style is auditory. Therefore I tend to put together my presentations with a heavy emphasis on the auditory—what I am saying. In order to make sure that I am communicating effectively with people who are visual and kinesthetic learners, I have to remember to add visual information, as well as exercises where people literally move.



The Accelerated Learning workshop is a great experience. Check it out at [www.alcenter.com](http://www.alcenter.com).

### BUILD YOUR PRESENTATION FOR MULTIPLE LEARNING STYLES

In order to make sure that you are communicating clearly with visual, auditory, and kinesthetic members of your audience, you will have to stop, think, and plan.

What kind of learner are you? You will tend to design your presentation in ways that best fit the way you learn. Be aware of your learning style so you realize how you are skewing your presentation.

- ★ If you are a visual learner, you will have lots of slides with diagrams and even words. For people in your audience who are not visual learners, this onslaught of slides will seem confusing, boring, or both.
- ★ If you are an auditory learner, then you will tend to talk a lot and not use many slides. This may leave your visual learners lost and confused.
- ★ If you are a kinesthetic learner, then you will build in lots of exercises and activities. Everyone appreciates some activities, but your visual and auditory learners will feel that they did a lot but did not retain the information.

Consider including some visual material, some talking, and some activities in order to address all three learning styles. If possible, find some friends or colleagues that have the learning styles you don't, and test your ideas about how to address their learning styles to see if they are effective.

#### Takeaways

- \* Build materials and activities for all three learning styles—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic—into your presentation.
- \* Don't let your own learning style unduly influence the way you present your material.

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## PEOPLE LEARN FROM MAKING MISTAKES

Actually, the title of this section is not quite correct, for two reasons.

- ★ People CAN learn from making mistakes, but they don't always.
- ★ People learn from mistakes when they get feedback about the mistake.

Because making mistakes and getting feedback on them is so important to effective learning, you want to build into your presentation opportunities for people to do activities, try out what you are presenting, and get feedback.

### THE BRAIN REACTS TO MISTAKES

In a study by Downar (2011), doctors made decisions (in a simulated situation) about what medications to prescribe. The doctors got feedback right away about whether they had made the right decision, and they then had an opportunity to try again, using what they had learned.

In looking at the doctors' brain activity during the study, Downar found that some brain responses showed problem-solving activity and increased attention during the next decision. In these cases, the participant was more likely to improve performance on the next task. He or she had learned from the mistake.

Some people, however, showed a different pattern of brain activity. Their brains did not show increased activity or problem solving. It was as if they were shutting out the negative feedback.

Interestingly, people whose brains show this shutting-down response pay much more attention to positive feedback.

### BUILD IN MISTAKES AND FEEDBACK

If people learn from the feedback they get when they make mistakes, then you might want to build in some opportunities for people to make mistakes. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- ★ Create a series of activities or exercises where people can try out what they are learning.
- ★ Start with activities that don't necessarily have right or wrong answers—for example, activities where people express their experience or opinion. This

makes people comfortable with speaking up. Then you can move to activities where they have to make decisions that they later find out are right or wrong.

- ★ Have people work in small groups. It's less intimidating to make a mistake in front of three people than 25.
- ★ Give people feedback on their mistakes.
- ★ Give people an opportunity to do a similar task where they can apply what they have learned.
- ★ Provide a nonthreatening environment so people are comfortable trying things and making mistakes. For example, if someone makes a mistake, don't call it a mistake. Instead of saying, "No, that's wrong," you can say instead, "I see why you might think that. Here's another way to think about it."
- ★ Let people know that mistakes are OK. Sometimes I will say to the audience before we go over an activity, "Since we learn from mistakes, I'm going to assume that you have all made some mistakes on purpose so that we can all learn."

### Takeaways

- \* The more experienced someone is in their field, the less likely they are to learn from their mistakes.
- \* Create a nonthreatening environment. Build in opportunities for people to make mistakes and feel OK about doing so.
- \* Give feedback when someone makes a mistake, and give them an opportunity to do another, similar task.

**"Make sure you have finished speaking before your audience has finished listening."**

**—Dorothy Sarnoff**

# HOW TO GRAB AND HOLD PEOPLE'S ATTENTION

I have a recurring nightmare that goes like this: I am in a room giving a presentation. I feel passionately about the topic, and I know that I've put together a great presentation. But as the presentation moves along, I start losing control over the group. I notice that a few people aren't listening to me. They are having their own conversation in the corner of the room. Then the inattention expands. More and more people stop listening and start talking to each other. Eventually I end up shouting over the conversations to try to be heard. People start leaving the room. No one is listening. I wake up suddenly in a panic and am very grateful to realize it was just a bad dream.

Luckily this nightmare has never become reality for me when I speak, but the fact that it is a recurring nightmare is a sign that losing the audience's attention is something I'm anxious about.

Being able to grab and hold the attention of your audience is the sign of a great presenter. In this chapter we look at what psychology can tell us about how to do just that.