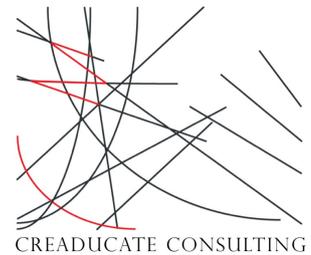


## Guide your listeners along the red thread, so they don't hang by one



William Shakespeare wrote, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet”. Likewise, a scientific talk by any other name would fill most people with dread. You must all be familiar with that feeling of impending doom: standing up there alone, with at least two dozen pairs of eyes focusing on you, waiting to judge you and the work you’ve slaved over, sacrificed for.... And for what? So they can nitpick the size of your arrows? Your color choices? The quality of your Western blots? Alas, I digress.

One of the most important factors in oral communication (read: can make or break your presentation) is your ability to tell a story. Now you may be saying, “Storytelling? Scientific presentations are supposed to be professional, monotonic, and loaded with big words! If you can get at least half your audience to yawn, then you’ve succeeded.” In reality, the story is everything!

Storytelling in scientific presentations usually means narrating a journey of characters (molecules, patients) through a series of events (experiments), from a beginning (hypothesis) to an end (conclusion), in a way that flows smoothly and clearly. Why is flow so important? Because people are busy ... and stressed ... and overwhelmed. Despite the fact that thinking/contemplation is their bread and butter, a lot of scientists want to turn their brains “off” when they attend a seminar. Hence, many check their phones when the lights go down, or let’s be honest, close their eyes altogether. As the millennials say, “the struggle is real”. But fear not! Dorothy had the yellow brick road, and oral presenters have the “red thread”.

The red thread, which Germans call “roter Faden” and Swedes “röd tråd”, can be described as “a theme or characteristic running throughout a situation or piece of writing” [1]. But even more helpful for our purposes is the English verb “to thread”, which means to “move carefully or skillfully in and out of obstacles” [1]. Indeed, there are quite a few obstacles when it comes to scientific talks. Where to begin? How much to include or explain, and to what extent? Should I share that “one” result? (We all know that “one” result. The one that walks a fine line between “ooo, that’s intriguing” and “huh?”) How do I make my work interesting? How do I show off the novelty? What is most important? What conclusions can I draw (especially when data are very, very preliminary)?

Creating a red thread means constantly asking yourself one simple question – How can I ensure that the audience sees clearly where we have been and where we are going? While the exact origin of the red thread is not totally clear, it has been traced back to Greek mythology, when the Cretan princess Ariadne provided a spool of thread to help guide Theseus out of the labyrinth housing the deadly Minotaur [2]. You (Ariadne) must give your audience (Theseus) a thread that helps them trace their steps through the dark, confusing labyrinth of your project. This thread can take the form of

- **flag phrases and transition phrases that show the audience where the path of your story changes**
  - “Given these previous results, we hypothesized that...”
  - “Despite extensive research, how protein X functions in cell type B is unclear. Therefore we attempted to...”
  - “Although the surgical technique has these advantages, it is associated with a high rate of complications... Therefore we examined whether...”
- **verbalizing your thought process, so that the audience can accompany you along your story in real time.** You can walk them through the labyrinth, rather than let them fall behind or stray along their own path—the Minotaur loves wanderers!
  - “This result was surprising, because we expected...”
  - “These results suggest that warmer temperatures harm the process. In order to test this directly, we have to examine...”

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• **opportune repetition, to keep the audience moving forward** so that they don't waste time retracing their steps in the labyrinth. In our example, Theseus needs to keep moving forward, otherwise he will become the proverbial sitting duck, i.e., Minotaur tartar.

“Remember at the beginning of my talk, I told you that we wanted to know....”

“So, the last three experiments have shown us that A, B, and C. This still leaves open the fourth question we began with: D. To address that question, we need....”

So, are you going to give a scientific presentation soon? Is it at a huge conference or just for colleagues in your lab? Regardless, make sure you identify one simple message that you want to convey, and design your talk in such a way that every graph, figure, and text relates to that simple message. Talks are not about spewing everything you've ever learned. They're about controlling your message and leading the audience to follow you along the same path as your red thread. After all, who wants to wake up from a nap and realize there is a Minotaur around the corner?

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/thread>

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariadne>

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