



*The Art of Presenting.*  
*An Informative Series*

NO 7

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*Nigel Holmes* – Explanation Graphics – Westport, Connecticut

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*Nigel Holmes, Principle of Explanation Graphics located in Westport, Connecticut, is a legendary graphic designer who has built a long and brilliant career focusing on information graphics and explanatory design. Nigel spent over 16 years at TIME Magazine (a good deal of it as Graphics Director) after which he became a freelance designer, lecturer, and the author of many books on the subject of designing information including Wordless Diagrams. I was introduced to Nigel's work several years ago by a good friend and have since marveled at Nigel's ability to objectify the subjective and to communicate the most complex ideas with deft simplicity.*

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**1. *How do you prepare for a presentation?***

I find out as much as possible about the audience, like the number expected to attend; I then tailor my remarks/slides to be appropriate; rehearse in my office as though the lecture was a piece of theater; arrive early to see the room/auditorium; run through all the potential technical problems (projector, sound, lighting); practice any audience interaction (for instance, how audience participants get up on the stage;) make sure water is at hand; and any props are in place.

Creatively speaking, I do lots of sketches; read as much as I can about the subject; Google it; and sleep on it. The next morning, I do more sketches; wait until I'm really happy with an idea; show it to a couple of people not involved with the project so they can point out silly mistakes, or just reject it outright. (This is good practice for the actual meeting, even if you are convinced that what you've done is absolutely the right answer.)

**2. *Describe your overall presentation style.***

Light rather than serious. Conversational.

**3. *What format do you present your ideas in? Formal? Casual sketches?***

Either very rough pencil sketches, scanned and sent as pdfs, or if the job is relatively simple: straight to finish, with the explicit understanding that changes can be made. I often go straight to finish because a chart needs to be plotted out or a diagram fully worked out so that the client can really see what they are

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getting. On a few occasions I have to start over completely. That may be because when the client has seen the result of what they asked for, they realize the data did not show the point(s) they wanted to make.

**4. *Do you still get nervous during presentations? If so – how do you handle it?***

Very! The way around this is to know exactly what I'm going to say and rehearse it, but not so much that I can't do some on-the-spot improvisations in reaction to audience questions or interruptions. Also it must not appear to be over-worked, or just read from a text – so I never write out the lecture and read it. I just make headings and expand on those, marginally. If I'm in my office, it's much less scary. However, I won't present anything that I don't think is right. I'd delay sending something and ask for more time if I was not ready.

**5. *How do you balance client changes with the creative integrity of the work?***

Probably your most important question. It's difficult, especially as most of my work is on tight deadlines. But I have never considered compromise a dirty word. More about that later.

**6. *What's the biggest mistake you've made during a presentation?***

Not taking my own advice about checking the technical aspects of the presentation. (I can't hook up my computer to the projector provided – that sort of thing.) I have vivid dreams about that. It's happened twice. (Why didn't I learn after the first time? Good question.) Also not heeding my own advice about taking time to think something through. I sent a sketch of a very weak, cliched idea (a rainbow was involved) to a big client at the beginning of a relationship thinking that maybe I could get away with it. They hated it and cancelled my involvement.

**7. *Is it difficult explaining design ideas to non-design professionals?***

Not if you have the right answer to their problem.

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**8. *What's the best advice you can give creatives to help them present better?***

Be thoroughly prepared, imagine the sort of reception you might get and practice answers. Before you do the presentation, say out loud what you are going to say – it's different than just thinking about what you'll say or merely writing something down. It will be much more confident and real if you actually practice it out loud. If you are rushed into a meeting somewhat unprepared and you cannot change the timing, use creative (not actual) BS.

Listen to a client's questions or objections, and come to a mutual compromise that you can live with. Choose your battles. Let some things go that you know don't matter that much. (They may matter a lot to the other side.) Digging in your heels over some esoteric point of typography or color will mark you as inflexible and could lead to a difficult relationship. Who wants that? Neither you nor the client. You can gently educate clients who don't appreciate the finer points of what you are doing, but you cannot expect most of them to be on the same page as you right away. It takes time.

**9. *How important are presentation skills for an artist/creative?***

Very, unless you are so brilliant that any little thing you do knocks people's socks off. It's important for designers – who are often solitary people working alone or even in an office – to get out and defend or fight for their work. You can't do that if you just mumble during a presentation. It will perpetuate the (wrong) myth that designers are all illiterate *art people* who can be treated as lesser beings in the process of finding solutions. We are easily demoted to merely making pretty pictures on demand. We must speak up!

*The questions on the following pages have less to do with presenting than with Nigel's creative process. They are uniquely pertinent to the type of work he produces.*

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***10. How difficult is it to objectify the subjective – Do you have a standard process?***

I've been accused of not being objective, and to a certain extent I think those are justified accusations. But sometimes I wonder about the much vaunted value of objectivity, what's wrong with allowing an opinion to surface? Of course it does depend on the job – for some jobs it would be wrong to allow one's own thoughts about the subject to be even lightly voiced, while in others it might actually be part of the assignment. While I was at *TIME Magazine*, I was supposed to be an even-handed journalist, but in those pieces where I did combine strong visual ideas with statistics (about the cause of oil shortages for instance,) most readers saw the value of a subjective opinion. And others said I should be fired, or just go into editorial cartooning.

So I handle my suppression of subjectivity on a case-by-case basis. There is no process. Some jobs I turn down (or I am removed from) because I don't want to be attached to, say, the avoidance of the facts about global warming. A large car company hired me to work on some graphics about the benefits of the future hydrogen economy, but they would not allow any mention of CO<sub>2</sub>. Since getting rid of CO<sub>2</sub> is a huge benefit of a hydrogen-powered car, this restriction made for some very contorted language, with obvious begging-the-question gaps. The reason for the ban was obvious: the company's current cars pumped tons of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere. But wouldn't the benefits of hydrogen be shown much more efficiently if readers could compare a hydrogen engine to a conventional gas engine? The project was cancelled. They ended up not doing the graphics at all.

***11. What do you consider the most difficult projects you get asked to be involved in.***

Apart from the kind of case outlined above, some of the most difficult jobs are where an art director has a fixed idea about the color, shape and look of a graphic without any regard for the content. I dislike conforming to color palettes that are

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set up for one reason (decorating the page) rather than as an information tool. Actually, I'm generally happy to do most graphics in two colors (black and red) even if that has nothing to do with the *look* of the magazine, or book, or poster. It's a bit like this: while writers are (quite rightly) edited for grammar and spelling, and while they must obviously fulfill the assignment as to content; the minute details of their sentences are not fiddled with because some editor irrelevantly wants to use certain words rather than others. As an outside freelance contributor for most of the work I do, this problem comes up surprisingly often.

If an art director asks me to draw something, I would hope he or she has looked at the way I do things. That seems a little arrogant, but it's not meant that way. It would just save a lot of time. I'm asking for people to accept what I can bring to the job (a way of thinking and a simple style,) and not what someone else thinks it should *look* like. 