

# Your time starts now!

A guide to achieving fame, fortune and success in the Three Minute Thesis<sup>®</sup> competition

**Simon Clews**

**Director, The Melbourne Engagement Lab  
The University of Melbourne**



## CONGRATULATIONS!

Congratulations on deciding to have a go at the Three Minute Thesis® competition—you will have an absolute ball, I am sure, and along the way you will acquire some extremely useful communication skills. If you can crystallise your years and years of intense study into three short minutes that will captivate, entertain and educate a non-specialist audience, I'd say there isn't a grant you can't get or a job you can't secure. Good luck!

Your preparation for 3MT® should be divided into two phases: let's call them pre-production and performance. But, before that, there is one big question you might like to consider: do you want to tackle this on your own? 3MT® can be a real challenge and you might like to think about assembling a pit crew—a group of friends who will give you honest and critical feedback (“... great opening line, but the purple floral shirt sucks big time ...”) as you progress through the competition. Those outside eyes and ears can really make a difference. Just a thought—I'll leave that one with you.

**IF YOU WANT  
TO TAKE THIS  
SERIOUSLY ...  
GET A PIT  
CREW!**

And now on to 3MT® glory...

## **ABOUT THE COMPETITION**

The Three Minute Thesis® competition is a professional skills development activity which challenges research higher degree students to explain their research project to a non-specialist audience in just three minutes – and not a second more! In this climate of engagement, there can be no better skill to acquire.

Developed by The University of Queensland in 2008 (and there's a very good story involving a drought and a three minute timer in the shower you might like to ask about), enthusiasm for the 3MT® concept and its adoption across numerous universities led to the development of initially a national, then subsequently an international competition (first called Trans-Tasman and now Asia-Pacific).

At the last count 3MT® competitions were being held in over six hundred universities and institutions across fifty nine countries worldwide. And those numbers just keep on growing.



## THE RULES

Like any competition, 3MT® has a set of rules. Here they are – read them, learn them and break them at your peril!

A single static PowerPoint slide is permitted (no slide transitions, animations or 'movement' of any description, the slide is to be presented from the beginning of the oration).

No additional electronic media (e.g. sound and video files) are permitted.

No additional props (e.g. costumes, musical instruments, laboratory equipment) are permitted.

Presentations are limited to three minutes maximum and competitors exceeding three minutes are disqualified.

Presentations are to be spoken word (e.g. no poems, raps or songs).

Presentations are considered to have commenced when a presenter starts their presentation through movement or speech.

The decision of the adjudicating panel is final.



## JUDGEMENT DAY

When you deliver your Three Minute Thesis® you will be presenting to both an audience of the general public and a panel of judges. Whether the judges are seated amongst, next to, at the front of or behind the audience, I would suggest the best thing to do is to treat the judging panel as part of the audience. Certainly don't pick them out for any special attention as this will only lead to an odd, rather stilted performance.

The judges will be assessing your performance against the following set criteria under two categories:

### ***Comprehension and Content***

Did the presentation provide an understanding of the background to the research question being addressed and its significance?

Did the presentation clearly describe the key results of the research including conclusions and outcomes?

Did the presentation follow a clear and logical sequence?

Was the thesis topic, key results and research significance and outcomes communicated in language appropriate to a non-specialist audience?



Did the speaker avoid scientific jargon, explain terminology and provide adequate background information to illustrate points?

Did the presenter spend adequate time on each element of their presentation - or did they elaborate for too long on one aspect or was the presentation rushed?

### ***Engagement and Communication***

Did the oration make the audience want to know more?

Was the presenter careful not to trivialise or generalise their research?

Did the presenter convey enthusiasm for their research?

Did the presenter capture and maintain their audience's attention?

Did the speaker have sufficient stage presence, eye contact and vocal range; maintain a steady pace, and have a confident stance?

Did the PowerPoint slide enhance the presentation - was it clear, legible, and concise?

When I am briefing judging panels, I tend to reduce all this down to two very simple questions:

“What did they say?”

“How did they say it?”

The judges will be looking for you to tell them a memorable and exciting story that has at its heart your research.

They want to be educated and entertained at the same time and they are looking for serious content and complexity, but delivered in a way that makes what you have to say accessible and comprehensible.

And they are looking for an ‘oration’ – not just a dry read of a text, but more of a performance that brings the words to life and makes them ring in our ears.



## WHO ARE WE DOING THIS FOR?

At its very essence, 3MT® is an exercise in effective communication. Good, effective communication is not only a two-way process, but the receiver of the communication – the audience if you’re speaking or the reader if you’re writing – is actually more important than you. I use the 49:51 ratio in lots of situations and I think it applies perfectly here. You, as speaker or presenter, are at the very most 49% of the equation, whereas your audience is at the very least 51%. Essentially, if they weren’t there, you wouldn’t be presenting; so you are doing it for them and not yourself. Remember that and, if ever you are tempted to get carried away by your own spectacular brilliance, it will help keep your feet planted firmly on the ground.

**COMMUNICATION  
IS ALWAYS A TWO  
WAY PROCESS**



## STAGE ONE: PRE-PRODUCTION

OK. Let's get to your 3MT® presentation, but let's start by looking at everything that goes on before you put pen to paper or open your mouth to speak. What I call 'pre-production.'

There are five factors over which you have varying degrees of control in the pre-production phase. These are:

**the venue**

**the technology**

**the judges**

**how you look**

**how you sound**

Let's take them one by one—the first three are elements with which you need to become familiar and the last two are elements over which you have total control. The main aim—particularly with the first three—is to become as familiar and comfortable as possible with the situation in which you will be speaking.

## THE VENUE

If you're going to take this seriously, you need to find out where the heat, semi-final or final that you are in is taking place and check out the venue before you actually take to the stage.

As a general rule, if the first time you see a venue is when you arrive to speak there, that's just not good enough. Every venue is different, sometimes dramatically, sometimes subtly, so you need to make a 'site inspection' to establish the lie of the land.

When you get there, look at where you will stand, where your audience will sit, where your slide will be projected and take note of the acoustics of the room. Practise speaking in the venue, clap your hands to hear the echo, move around the floor. Own the space, as they say.

Your aim here is to become thoroughly familiar with the venue.

## THE TECHNOLOGY

This is, as far as a 3MT® presentation is concerned, the microphone that you will use. All other technology such as the projection of your slide, will be someone else's responsibility so you needn't worry about that. And this is, again, an exercise in becoming familiar with the environment in which you will be performing.

There are four possible microphone types you may be confronted with:

Static, wired, on a stand—just remember to keep your mouth six inches or so from the mike and not to move too far from it. While these types are not overly directional, if you move your head too far to one side, you will 'go off mike' and not be heard.

Wireless, hand-held (a.k.a. the ice-cream cone)—same distance rules apply, but as the mike is in your hand, it's very hard to go off mike with this one. However, just be aware that you'll lose one of your hands for gesturing in this situation so, if your presentation culminates with a version of the 'fish that got away was this big' story, you're in trouble, to put it mildly.

The bug, wired or wireless—the little bug-sized thing they pin on newsreaders, usually on a lapel or shirt collar. Just make sure you don't brush this one during your performance and avoid wearing dangly jewellery

that could get tangled with it or, worse still, rub against it while you are speaking. Synthetic fibres can be a problem here, but let's just assume you have too much good taste to be seen out wearing nylon and you'll be fine.

The boom, over-the-ear, 'Madonna' mike—not a lot you can do if the venue uses these; in the unlikely event that you have a choice, just say a polite 'no thank you,' but if you have to wear one, try not to look too silly!

With all mikes - whether they are on a stand, in your hand, pinned to your clothes or over your ear—there are two golden rules: the first is - don't touch them! Ever!! This makes a horrible noise and looks unprofessional (there is nothing more amateurish that a public speaker can do than to walk up to the microphone stand and fiddle with it).

Secondly, always assume all microphones are always 'on.' Many a politician has come to a sticky end by assuming a mike is off and I'd hate you to be overheard muttering unflattering comments about your judging panel. Not the best way to get a high score, I can assure you!

And there is, of course, the possibility that—particularly in a small room—that you may not even need a microphone. In this situation, the rule is to make sure you speak clearly to the person in the very back row.

## THE JUDGES

Before you begin your heat you should find out who will be judging you. Universities are small places and chances are you will know, or at least recognise, the people judging you.

There's not a lot more you can or need to do about this – bribes, threats and coercion being generally frowned upon for some reason—but knowing who your judging panel will be is all part of feeling totally comfortable with the situation when you make your presentation.

## HOW YOU LOOK

You might only be speaking to the audience and the judges for three short minutes, but for all intents and purposes you might as well be taking part in a one hour job interview.

How you look is vitally important and can convey some very positive and equally some very negative messages about you and your sense of professionalism.

Find a friend and try staring at him or her for three minutes: you will be amazed at how much you see in that person and how many subliminal messages you receive from the way they are dressed and the way they look.

Just as the traditional suit and tie<sup>1</sup> at the job interview convey that sense of professionalism that sends the message that you are the best person for the job, the right look for your three-minute pieces performance will convey very similar messages to the audience and, more importantly, the judges.

---

<sup>1</sup> I once got into trouble for using a so-called gender-specific clothing reference here. Ugh! Did you not see Brad and Angelina at the 2014 BAFTAs?!

## HOW YOU SOUND

Again, there can be some very important subliminal messages conveyed to your audience and your judges in the way that you sound; if you need to warm up your vocal chords you should do this before the performance as you need to sound absolutely at your best from the moment you begin speaking.

If your voice is even in the slightest bit croaky, try any of the variations on good, old-fashioned honey and lemon or that favourite of opera singers—a small slug of brandy (just make sure you have gum or mints handy in this case—there’s another subliminal message you don’t want to be sending!). A throat lozenge in your bag is always good for emergencies too.

Clearing your throat or coughing during the performance—particularly a nervous cough—sends a very negative message to your audience and to your judging panel.

## STAGE TWO: THE PERFORMANCE

Now we've worked out the logistics surrounding your presentation, let's look at what you are actually going to say during your all-important three minutes of fame— what I am going to call the 'performance.'

When you come to write the script for your Three Minute Thesis® presentation it is absolutely vital that you remember that you are presenting to a non-specialist audience. Probably the best way to think of this audience is to imagine that they are just as intelligent and just as well-informed as you are, but that they haven't had time to do the research that you have.

Crucially, this means not dumbing down your content and not patronising or condescending to your audience in any way whatsoever. Everyone knows when they are being talked down to and it is a very unpleasant feeling – certainly not a feeling that would inspire a judge to mark you high, for example.

And while it probably doesn't need saying, I am going to say it anyway – you do need to write a script. No matter how good you are at speaking off the cuff, you will never be as good as when you have prepared a script. It hasn't happened very often, but I've seen one or two ad-libbed 3MT® presentations and ... well ... best we don't go there, I think.



## WRITING YOUR SCRIPT

There are a few simple rules you should bear in mind when writing the script for your 3MT® presentation, rules which also apply to pretty much any writing for a non-academic audience.

Writing for a non-specialist audience means...

**Using shorter words, shorter sentences and shorter paragraphs**—if you aren't clear as to the impact of this sort of writing can have, just go and read any good journalism or even read a good writer of fiction like Ernest Hemingway—someone who is an absolute master at using shorter words in shorter sentences in shorter paragraphs to absolutely dynamic effect.

**Choosing active verbs over passive verbs:** when speaking to a non-specialist audience you should never hide behind the impassive verb—all those 'it is thought that', 'it is proposed that', 'it has been suggested that', etc. First of all, you only have three minutes to get your message across and to use more words than is necessary is basically a waste of time and secondly, in the eyes of the non-specialist audience member, the impassive verb is tantamount to an act of linguistic cowardice—if you really think something, then at least have the guts to tell us that with two simple words—'I think.'

**Avoiding jargon, acronyms, etc.** —the whole point of using jargon and acronyms is to enhance that sense of exclusivity which academia seems to thrive on. However, when you're speaking to a non-specialist audience there is nothing worse than projecting this through a speech laden with jargon and acronyms. This is guaranteed to instantly turn that audience off so, when you're speaking to your 3MT® audience, you need to be as inclusive as possible. Wherever possible avoid anything that the general public might not understand and, if you can really find no alternative word, then qualify or explain what it is you are talking about.

**Qualifying unknown concepts, people, places, etc.** — never make assumptions about the audience for your non-specialist presentation, particularly assumptions that they will automatically know what you are talking about. This is a classic academic trap—“I understand subject x and find it absolutely fascinating, therefore everyone understands subject x and finds it absolutely fascinating.” WRONG! And not just wrong, but lazy too. With names, for example, there are very few people who are universally known; once you get past the Pope or the Queen or Michael Jackson or the Beatles or, at a pinch, Madonna and Cher, then anyone of lesser celebrity probably needs some sort of qualification when mentioned to a non-academic audience. So, you might know that Sir John Smith is the leading authority in your field, but the rest of us will almost certainly have never heard of him or his earth-shattering discoveries.

This means you need to qualify him when you introduce him—“Sir John Smith, one of the world’s leading authorities on... etc.” Afterwards by all means namedrop as often as you like, but the first time around tell us who he is. The same goes for places, institutions, events, etc.—never assume we know what you are talking about because the chances are good that we won’t.

**Avoiding ‘academic’ words** – make sure you avoid using words that are specific to academia and which will not be understood by a non-specialist audience; ‘discourse’ is a classic academic word which has virtually no place in the non-academic world. While there is nothing wrong with using it in the academic context, as soon as you use a word like this in a non-specialist context, you potentially alienate your audience and, as a result, fail in your attempt to communicate to them<sup>2</sup>.

There are many different writing techniques you can use when writing for a non-specialist audience; here are just a few useful ideas to get you started ...

**Make sure your presentation has a beginning, a middle and an end**—it might sound very traditional, but you are telling a story and there is nothing more satisfying for an audience to listen to than a well-rounded story.

---

<sup>2</sup> I used to do a joke here that went: If you use a word like ‘ontological’ in your presentation, you might as well have a T-shirt made that says ‘I AM A WANKER.’ But these days I am much too classy to do that.

**Think about using a circular structure**—an old journalist’s trick, this one: a piece of writing that begins in one particular place, which then goes off in various directions to tell a story, but ends up in the same place as it started. This can also be a very satisfying structure for your audience.

**Include human interest**—put some people into your story; even the most impersonal, clinical topics will by necessity have some relationship to the real world and the people that live in that world and any link that you can make to this world will bring the story closer to your audience.

**Bring your piece (and the characters in it) to life**—there is nothing like a few quotes or anecdotes to bring a piece of writing to life—you are telling a story that is really not that different from a book, a play or a film so use dialogue like books, plays and films do.

**Be aware of rhythm and pacing**—there is actually a lot that can be learned from good stand-up comedy—the rhythm and pacing of a good story or joke told by a classy performer can actually give you great insights into how to address any audience. Watch how a great comedian builds up to and then delivers a punch line and imagine the effect you could have if you delivered your academic punch line with the same sense of pace, rhythm and timing.

**Use humour ... but use it carefully** - there is nothing like humour to bring even the most serious of subjects to life—one quick look at Shakespeare will show you how this can be done well—but make sure you use your humour carefully and be prepared to deliver it well. Don't forget that, if you do well in the competition, you may well end up telling the same story or reciting the same joke three or four times at various heats, semi-finals and eventually in the Grand Final. It takes a great performer to deliver a joke with spontaneity more than once so, if you do decide to bring humour—particularly jokes—into your presentation, just be sure that this is something you will be able to do well and that your humour won't come across as stale and fall flat the second time around.

**Write too much and then cut back** – I am going to talk about editing soon, but for now - distil, distil and distil again! It is always better to write six minutes worth of presentation and cut it back to three than to write two minutes worth and have to pad it out to three. Cutting back, distilling and crystallising your presentation will always make for something that is punchier, more dynamic and more effective.

**Read out loud to yourself**—the easiest way to ensure that your writing sounds good is to read it out loud to yourself. And this doesn't just apply to these 3MT®, of course; the easiest way to spot any linguistic laziness or simply a poor turn of phrase is to read your writing out

to yourself. Put simply – while your eyes are forgiving, your ears are highly critical.

**The ‘hook’**—this is a tried and tested trick from journalism to get a reader involved in what you are saying—start with something that is of relevance to your audience to ‘hook’ them into your story. This can be something very personal, very emotive, very human. Have a look at the 3MT® examples on the web and see how many of the speakers start with a ‘hook’ that builds a bridge between the everyday experience of the audience and the very academic material they are about to present. The word ‘imagine’ can be very useful here, as can a link that takes a seemingly clinical subject, but relates it to something that is part of everyone’s lives. Have a look at the clips online and see, for example, how knee injuries came to life courtesy of the World Cup!

There are only three  
communication skills  
worth worrying about:

SPEAKING

LISTENING

WATCHING

## Writing then Editing

Remember the 49:51 ratio we talked about earlier? Well, here it is again. I told you it applied in many different situations. Now, as important as writing is – and it is, of course, very important – editing is actually more important. Yes – you’ve guessed it - editing is at least 51% of the equation.

In fact, I seriously believe you should always aim to write too much, but with the intention of ruthlessly cutting back afterwards. This is that notion of distilling again. Ideally, you should write at least twice as much as you need and then edit by half.

Human beings are warm, sensitive, caring creatures (which is what makes us write with passion), but that also makes us fallible. So when we write we waffle, we pad and we fill – the written equivalents of the ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’ inexperienced speakers resort to when they run out of the things to say. But that’s perfectly OK ... as long as we then edit all those unnecessary words out to leave the good stuff behind – you know; wheat and chaff and all that.

So let’s start by aiming for a six minute thesis, shall we? And when we’ve done that, let’s get out our red pens and trim it by half!

Editing can be very simple – in fact, in its simplest form, it is all about checking:

- spelling
- capitalization
- punctuation
- grammar
- sentence structure
- subject/verb agreement
- consistent verb tense
- correct word usage

Remember all that? You probably did it at school. But that's only the beginning - editing is so much more than that. As a general rule, editing is where you step away from the page as a passionate, engaged writer and take a long, cold, hard look at the writing as a clinical, analytical and detached editor.

As a writer you are:

Subjective  
Emotional  
Passionate  
Personal  
Attached

And your writing comes from the heart.



But when you edit, you are:

Objective  
Clinical  
Dispassionate  
Impersonal  
Detached

And your editing comes from the mind.

There's a great quote from British writer Zadie Smith that makes a lot of sense: 'The secret to editing your work is simple: you need to become its reader instead of its writer.'

I often think of the editing process as a bit like a long, slow zoom on a video camera. You start with a nice, wide shot and then go closer and closer in like this ...

Overall structure [wide shot]  
Structure of paragraphs [mid shot]  
Structure/effectiveness of individual sentences  
[close up]  
Individual words [extreme close up]

And then you go back over your text looking at ...

Clarity and meaning  
Style and spine [the spine is what holds the whole thing together – in a way, the glue]

## A Few Thoughts on Editing

**You should always edit when you have finished, never before.** It might be tempting to stop along the way and do a bit of editing and, while it is possible to fiddle with punctuation and spelling and grammar, for example, you simply can't look at the bigger picture. You can't say to yourself: "That amazing ending I just wrote would actually work much better as the opening to my piece." So be patient. Finish writing, then start editing. And, if you need a break ... just take a break.

**Put as much distance as you can between the writing and the editing.** When you've finished writing, put the pen down or close the laptop and step away from your desk. Have a coffee, walk the dog, go see a movie. If you've got the time and the money, go away for the weekend. Go on a cruise if you like! Anything you can do to detach yourself from the writing will make the editing process so much easier – ideally, when you come back to edit your work, the writing should seem unfamiliar to you.

**Try to develop two different personalities.** This is not as hard as it sounds and will come with practice. The more you switch hats between the engaged, passionate, writer with a story to tell and the cold-hearted, ruthless editor with a word count and a deadline to meet, the easier it will get.

**Become aware of your own bad habits.** This is not so much editing as trying to remove the need for unnecessary editing. We all know prevention is better than cure. Here self-awareness can be a very useful thing. If you know the sorts of mistakes you make subconsciously, but regularly, you can anticipate them and ultimately eliminate them. More than a few professional writers keep lists of mistakes they make repeatedly and I've even known writers who have written their own personal style guide in order to keep their writing focussed, accurate and on track.

**Edit for at least as long as you write** – if you write for an hour, you should edit for at least an hour. I could (and have been known to) go on about this for hours, but it's important that you realise that editing is not an afterthought. It is so much more than a quick tidy up at the end and is, in fact, probably the most important part of the whole writing process.

There are many, many editing techniques you can use – in a way it doesn't matter which one you use, as long as you actually use it and use it seriously. In fact, if you're at all serious about editing, you'll use more than technique and you'll use them repeatedly and rigorously.

One of the greatest exponents of written English, George Orwell, was a particularly good editor of his own work – you can read his thoughts on writing in an essay

called *Politics and the English Language*, which seems to be widely and readily available on the Internet. Whether that's legal or not, I am not so sure. When Orwell had finished with his own work, every single word on the page had been interrogated to ensure it was performing a function and achieving something. That's what we should all be aiming for. You should be able to take any word in your writing, remove it and the writing should suffer as a result. If it doesn't, you obviously don't need that word and you can leave it out. You can do the same analysis with every sentence in your writing and then every paragraph and so on. Make sure you are realistic and ruthless – as they say in publishing: “Don't be afraid to kill your darlings.”

## YOUR SLIDE

Now, while you and your speech make up the majority of the presentation, you also get an additional opportunity to communicate your message by having a slide projected behind you. It's very important that you don't waste this opportunity – so, when preparing your slide, you need to think very carefully about what its function is and how it can support, and not detract from, your three minute presentation.

In fact, in a way your Three Minute Thesis® presentation is a piece of theatre. In *The Empty Space*, legendary British theatre director Peter Brook wrote: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged." This is essentially what's happening in a Three Minute Thesis® presentation.

So, if your presentation is an 'act of theatre' – a performance, if you like – then your slide can be considered as the backdrop for that performance. Think of it as a tiny, two dimensional theatrical set. And, like any good piece of theatrical design, it needs to work at a fairly visceral level – it certainly doesn't want to be competing with you in terms of information communication.

Here are a few ideas/hints that you can take in or ignore

as you see fit when preparing your slide ...

### Show Slides and Pre-Show Slides – most 3MT®

organisers have added a pre-show slide now so that all the information that used to clog up 3MT® slides in the early days is dealt with before we see your show slide. Take advantage of this – any information that is extraneous to the presentation belongs here. Really, all we want to see on your show slide is your name and your title.

“... and now a word from our sponsor ...” – while it is creditable that you want to acknowledge all the sponsors and supporters of your research project, your 3MT® slide is not the place to be doing this. All that happens is that you end up with a very messy, overly busy slide that detracts from your overall presentation. Again – put this on the pre-show slide so you and your sponsor are happy, but not to the detriment of your spectacular show slide.

### How much text is enough? How much text is too much?

– generally the old adage of ‘less is more’ applies here. In fact, almost all of your text should be spoken during your presentation and any text on the slide should just support this. If you really insist on having text on your slide, I suppose it could act as a reminder of a few crucial points—maybe one or two key phrases to reinforce the message—but other than this, your name and your title, very little more is required.

**We can read your slide – you don't need to do it for us –** it might sound obvious, but I'm sure like me you've had to sit in a room for what felt like a lifetime when the guest speaker has felt the need to read out loud the content of an entire slide presentation that has far, far too much text on it. As you know, this is slightly less interesting than watching paint dry and should be avoided at all costs. And when you think about it, it's also very patronising – we're all big boys and girls and can read (hell, we can probably do joined up writing by now too) so we don't need any help with that, thank you very much.

**Less is more—a slide can be too busy –** think clean, clear images with minimal text that is typeset in a striking font. Nothing more. Probably the best slide I have ever seen was for a talk on a near-extinct language in Tibet. A beautiful image of a village nestled in the mountains in Tibet that bled all the way to edge of the slide and that simply bore the speaker's name and the presentation title in a clean, clear font in the bottom right hand corner—simple, dignified, strikingly beautiful and highly effective.

**The advantages and disadvantages of not having a slide—**or, as I like to call it, the huge disadvantages of not having a slide. I have only seen this attempted once and it worked initially, but then backfired terribly thereafter. One presenter I saw thought they would

make huge impact by—unlike everyone else—not using a slide at all. It worked the first time and even caused quite a ripple through the audience. However, the second time, the person operating the projector thought there had been a mistake so hastily advanced to the slide of the next speaker’s slide and the time after that, even though a blank slide had been inserted into the sequence, the screen saver kicked in half way through the three minutes and the audience had to try and concentrate on the speech while the Microsoft logo swooped alarmingly around the screen. The moral of the story? It’s a nice idea, but one which has the potential to backfire on you hugely. Really: just use a slide!



## ROLE MODELS

So who should you be looking to emulate when you present your Three Minute Thesis®? TV presenters and newsreaders (particularly from non-commercial or public television stations), public speakers, commentators and public intellectuals, such as David Suzuki, Germaine Greer, Alain de Botton, Simon Schama, Margaret Atwood and Stephen Fry, are good examples, but I am sure you won't need to look far to find great examples of people who can speak well, accessibly and in a lively, intelligent and engaging manner. And, if in doubt, just have a quick look at the program of your local writers' festival. Who have they put on the main stage to give the key note address? That'd be your role model there!

My personal favourites at the moment are good stand-up comedians – not the sort of just tell jokes, but those that tell extended stories with wit, intelligence, timing and a bit of personality. I often think that, if you can hold an audience (sometimes in the tens of thousands) in the palm of your hand for two hours armed with only a microphone, you must have something going for you as a communicator – think Eddie Izzard or Ricky Gervaise, for example.

## WHAT NOT TO DO

As with any competition there are some definite ‘no-nos’—some spelled out in the official rules and some not.

**Costumes**—just dress as though you were going for a three minute job interview, OK? You don’t need to dress any more than that. If the judges sense even the hint of a costume, out you go!

**Props**—same as costumes; a very big no-no in the rules. It’s the power of your words and your oratory we are looking for, not your skills with a deck of cards or a baton!

**Slide transitions**—don’t even think about it. Not even a tiny, sneaky automatic one. If your slide so much as changes one pixel—again: make sure you close the door behind you as leave!

**Muttering**—if we can’t understand you, we can’t give you a good mark, can we? Same ‘job interview’ rules apply—there is very little point in writing a magnificent speech if no-one can hear it. Speak up. And, if speaking up doesn’t come naturally to you, practise!

**Looking at the floor**—eye contact is crucial here; an old speaker’s trick is to aim to make eye contact with everyone in the audience (judges included) at least once

during your speech. You'd be amazed how much more personal—and, therefore, effective—this makes your speech.

**Sex, religion and politics**—the three great dinner party conversation starters/stoppers. Just remember: you don't know anything about your audience's or your judges' belief systems, morals, ethics, standards, etc., so raise these subjects at your own risk—you might get away with it with a dash of humour or as your 'hook,' but tread carefully. Very carefully.

**“ums”, “ahs” and “ers”**—come on, people; you've only got three minutes! Get yourself a recorder (audio or video) and record yourself. Play it back and become aware of when you um and ah. Then practise, practise and practise until you have ... um ... eliminated this.

**Hands in pockets or hypergesticulation!** — find the middle ground with your hands—don't tuck them away in your pockets as that looks unnatural, not to say slightly shifty, but equally avoid looking like an operatic tenor on steroids. If you need a benchmark, back to good on-screen TV talent such as foreign correspondents for that one, I think.

## WHAT YOU ARE AIMING FOR ...

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Confident</b> – confidence comes through practice. It really is as simple as that. So, the more you prepare, the more confident you will get. Put simply: you <u>cannot</u> practise too much.</p> | <p><b>Calm</b> – if you’ve done all your homework and preparation, what can go wrong? And, if you’re really good, you will have thought about and anticipated everything that could possibly go wrong and mentally dealt with it.</p> |
| <p><b>Likeable</b> – just be yourself. Remember the audience for 3MT is a non-academic audience so no-one is out to get you! Relax, take a deep breath and just show us the real you.</p>                | <p><b>Humble</b> – no-one likes a smartass (with the sole exception of dear departed Christopher Hitchens), but treat your audience with respect and you’ll be fine on this one.</p>  |
| <p><b>Genuine</b> – this one goes without saying; you’re a researcher talking about their work. What could be more genuine than that?</p>  | <p><b>Credible</b> – no problems here; you’re an expert, you know what you’re talking about. How can you not be credible?!</p>  |
| <p><b>Authoritative</b> – same as for credible. You know what you are talking about and we are keen to hear.</p>   | <p><b>In Control</b> – if you do your homework on the logistics, you can’t help but be in control.</p>  |

## Three Tricks for a Better 3MT®

There are all sorts of ways you can get ready for 3MT® and inject a little fun into the process at the same time. Here are just three suggestions ...

**Improvise your content** – before you put pen to paper, assemble your pit crew around you and talk to them for three minutes on your topic completely off the cuff. Do this a few times. So what are we doing here? Firstly we are becoming familiar and comfortable with three minutes. Secondly, we're feeling our way around our topic in an informal way before we get to the more formal writing phase. And thirdly, we are doing a little initial market research; if you keep an eye on your audience (which as a good communicator, you will always do), you can gauge their reactions to what you say.

**Do three minutes on anything** – we often make a party game out of this and put odd (sometimes *really* odd) topics on folded up pieces of paper into a hat and draw them out at random.

It's just a really good way to have fun while becoming comfortable with giving a three minute talk. And, if there's a few of you and you want to turn it into a bit of a light-hearted competition, you might want to introduce the rules of:

No repetition  
No deviation  
No hesitation<sup>3</sup>

**Do three minutes of questions and answers** – again this is before you put pen to paper or finger to keyboard. Gather your troops and tell them “I’m going to talk about ... whatever your topic happens to be ... what would you like to know?” Not only is it yet more practice at standing in front of people and talking, but the sorts of questions that your team will ask make for perfect market research to help you decide what is the most interesting or exciting part of your research story.

---

<sup>3</sup> Unashamedly stolen from the British radio show *Just a Minute*.

## **REMEMBER...**

All good performances – even the most spontaneous looking ones – are the result of a great deal of careful preparation and an enormous amount of rehearsal.

And you've only got three minutes.... so make every second count.

Good luck!

**Simon Clews**

Melbourne, July 2018

[www.simonclews.com](http://www.simonclews.com)

