2026 EDITION

YOUR TIME STARTS NOW!

3MT®

A GUIDE TO ACHIEVING SUCCESS IN THE 3 MINUTE THESIS COMPETITION

SIMON CLEWS

Your time starts now! second edition, May 2026

Thesis Whisperer Books, Acton, ACT, Australia

www.thesiswhisperer.com
www.simonclews.com

Text: Simon Clews

Cover design: Phoenix Nguyen
Author portrait: Zélie

ISBN: 978-0-6451937-2-5

Contents

Foreword to the second edition

It's 2026 and both this book and the Three Minute Thesis competition have come a long way. 3MT® is now approaching its 18th year (and will soon be able to go to bars and vote), this book is celebrating its 5th birthday (games, cake and red cordial at the local play centre, naturally) and sometimes this author feels like he's well past his use-by date (academia will do that to you).

With these anniversaries in mind, I decided that the book needed a bit of spit and polish to bring it up to date. There are a few new ideas to help you succeed, a lot of things I have learned from being part of the competition all these years, and one or two new jokes (but don't worry – I haven't retired the old ones).

I've also decided to make this edition free – with the four horsemen of the Apocalypse seemingly on the horizon, it seems that poor, struggling research students no longer have money for frivolous things like books and entertainment, or

even food and accommodation. So, this is my gift to you.

The Three Minute Thesis competition really is one of my most favourite things. To watch geniuses like you (yes – as far as I am concerned, if you doing a PhD at a university, you really are a genius) encapsulate the most amazing and complex ideas into three highly entertaining and easily understood minutes still makes the hairs on the back on my neck stand up.

Good luck with your studies, don't forget to keep communicating your research to the rest of us, and I hope to see you competing in 3MT® somewhere soon.

Simon Clews

Melbourne, May 2026

About the author

Simon Clews works with writers and academics around the world to help them improve their **written and oral communication**, and develop their careers as effective communicators and providers of creative, well-written non-fiction for non-academic audiences. He does this **both in-person and online** and, as well as teaching in numerous universities around **Australia**, he is a regular trainer/professional development provider in **Canada**, **Singapore**, **the UK**, **Thailand** and **Hong Kong**. As a result, he is one of the most in-demand trainers in this field.

He is currently a Learning Advisor at the **Australian National University**, a world leading and innovative university based in Canberra, where he works with HDR candidates, as the PhDs are known there, on their writing and communication skills.

Prior to this, for fifteen years he was the Director of the **Melbourne Engagement Lab** at one of Australia's highest ranked universities, **Melbourne University**, where enhanced the reputation of PhD candidates and early career

researchers through training, encouraging and facilitating some of Australia's brightest minds to make their work accessible to non-academic audiences.

Simon also loves a good competition and is very active both nationally and internationally in the **Three Minute Thesis** and, prior to its sad demise this year, the **Visualise Your Thesis** competitions, both highly successful examples of academic research being communicated in interesting, accessible and engaging ways. He's also had a tiny involvement in **Dance Your PhD** and dreams of one day being invited to judge **Bake Your PhD**.

Prior to setting up the **Melbourne Engagement Lab**, Simon took the fledgling **Melbourne Writers' Festival** and, over fourteen years, placed it firmly on the world stage.

He was also Creative Program Director for Melbourne's Reader's Feast bookstore producing numerous iterations of **Crime & Justice**, the **History Writers Festival**, **Writers on Collins**, **Writers at the Convent** and **Writers at Como**. Simon was also responsible for programming

Stories Alive, a large-scale annual celebration of writing for children at Melbourne's Hamer Hall.

Over the years Simon has been a frequent contributor to newspapers and magazines (including ***The Age***, ***The Sydney Morning Herald***, ***The Australian***, and the ***Herald Sun***) and once even took his highly honed retail skills and ventured into the world of guidebooks with ***Let's Go Shopping***, a tongue-in-cheek international mail order shopping directory.

If you enjoy ***Your Time Starts Now!*** look out for ***The New Academic*** from NewSouth Books in Australia and Sourcebooks in the States – a practical handbook on all aspects of sharing your amazing research with the world – and even more on the topic in **Be Visible or Vanish** from Routledge, co-written with Thesis Whisperer Inger Mewburn.

Introduction

So, you've decided to have a go at the Three Minute Thesis competition? Brilliant! Let me be the first to congratulate you on your decision. You're going to have an absolute ball.

Along the way you're going to meet a bunch of extraordinarily talented people, you will acquire a raft of extremely useful communication skills, and you are going to learn how to talk about your research in a way that makes people sit up and really take notice.

In fact, if you can crystallize 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, if you put your mind to it.

Ever since the competition began, I've been traveling around the world training, coaching, judging, hosting and organizing competitions. I've judged heats, semi-finals and finals at numerous universities, and have taught the fine art of getting your message across in three short

minutes to more entrants than I care to remember.

I've been lucky enough to be part of the 3MT® journey at many Australian universities; I've been involved in local versions of the competition in Singapore, Thailand, Canada and Hong Kong; and the highlight of my calendar each year used to be heading to Brisbane to attend the Asia-Pacific Finals where I never failed to be amazed as I watched some of the world's best academic communicators compete.

These days – thanks to COVID and its long, long tail – the Asia-Pacific Grand Final is held online via video submission, which still sees some amazing presentations being made, but I am sure I am not the only one to miss the nerves, thrills and excitement of a live audience and a huge packed lecture theatre.

Over the years I've seen the skill levels of the competitors rise and rise (and rise) as each round of participants observes and learns from all those who have gone before them. In this book I hope to pass on some of the things I've learned from watching people present so that this process can

continue on into the future.

And now, colleagues, on to 3MT® fame, fortune and glory (although I should probably add a bit of a disclaimer here: the actual 'fortune' in question is limited to not that much of a fortune at all really. Sorry about that. Higher education is as broke as the rest of us. What can I say?)!

About the competition

There's a great quote from former UK Chief scientist Sir Mark Walport from 2013 **– "Science is not finished until it's communicated."** Applying equally to the worlds of HASS and STEM, this quote shows the importance of communication to any researcher and could easily be seen as the backdrop to 3MT®.

The Three Minute Thesis competition was set up as a professional skills development activity to challenge research higher degree students to explain their research project to an intelligent, but non-specialist audience in just three minutes – and not a second more! As Sir Mark Walport would undoubtedly agree, in this climate of knowledge transfer, knowledge exchange, engagement and impact, there can be no better skill to acquire.

And with increased competition for what sadly looks like a declining number of jobs in academia, the more you can convince people of the value of your research, the better your chances are of survival in what is a pretty precarious environment.

Developed by The University of Queensland in 2008 (and there's a very good story involving a statewide drought, a three-minute timer, and a senior academic in the shower you might like to ask Google about), huge 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 the Trans-Tasman Finals and now the Asia-Pacific Finals).

The competition then jumped the equator and very quickly conquered the northern hemisphere, although sadly it looks unlikely that there will ever be a genuinely worldwide competition due to the disconnect between the academic timetables, not to mention the time differences, in the two hemispheres.

At the last count 3MT® competitions were being held in over **nine hundred universities** and institutions across **eighty-five countries** worldwide. And those numbers just keep on growing. So, you are about to take part in something that is very special and truly global in scale.

The rules

Like any competition, 3MT® has rules. These days there are the basic rules for a live presentation, plus a few extra rules for the new 'virtual' format. Here they are – with my comments in parentheses – 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. (Increasingly these days, you'll probably also get what I call a 'pre-show' slide, but we'll talk about that later.) On stage the slide will be projected above and/or behind you – there may even be two images of your slide if you're in one of those lecture theatres with multiple screens. In a video presentation the slide may take up the whole of the screen at one point during your presentation or it could appear in the background in one of the top corners or on the side of the screen for the whole of your three minutes.

No additional electronic media (e.g. sound and

video files) are permitted. (I don't think I've ever seen anyone try to flout this rule, but don't be tempted. That way lies instant disqualification. You are essentially a performer delivering a one-person show, albeit a very short one – your slide is your set or backdrop. Treat it as such.)

No additional props (e.g. costumes, musical instruments, laboratory equipment) are permitted. (Same as above – never seen it; don't try it! But I did once see a great presentation by someone who started by holding a coin in his hand and talking about chance. Which way up would it land if he tossed it? Would it be heads? Would it be tails? The tension in the audience was palpable as everyone, clearly well versed in the rules of the competition, was horrified by this clearly illegal use of a prop. When he seemed to throw the coin skywards only to reveal he had nothing in his hands, there was a gasp. His presentation was not about chance at all; it was about perception. Absolutely brilliant!)

Presentations are limited to three minutes maximum and competitors exceeding three minutes are disqualified. (Of all the rules, this really is the one that you don't want to break. I

often say if you're still going when you hit two minutes and fifty-nine seconds, just stop speaking, mid-sentence if necessary, and you could still win. But continue bravely to the end of that sentence and you might as well just head straight for the door.

Of course, on screen you get the advantage of multiple takes to get your timing right, but on stage you'll need to practise, practise, practise until your body clock learns what three minutes feels like and sticks to it instinctively time and time again.)

Presentations are to be spoken word - e.g. no poems, raps or songs. (Another rule rarely broken although I do still remember a competitor in Melbourne from many years ago who did three mind-blowing minutes of rhyming couplets – possibly even iambic pentameters! – about a youth-related welfare issue she was studying, but who sadly had to be disqualified on the spot. Such a shame.

If it's any consolation, Shakespeare would have sucked at 3MT®.)

Presentations are considered to have commenced when a presenter starts their presentation through movement or speech. (The important thing to note here is that if you're presenting on stage, ***you*** start the clock, not the timekeeper. When you say your first word or make a significant gesture, they will start the counter running. This means there's no nervous glances at the organisers wondering if you should start or not. When you are good and ready, you start. I don't think people realize what a huge boost to their confidence this can be and how it can make the difference between a powerful, controlled opening or an awkward, nervous stumble into the presentation.)

The decision of the adjudicating panel is final. (It's pretty obvious this one. Don't be a sore loser and don't challenge the judges; they are always right, and you will *never* win in an argument with them.)

There are now, as I said before, a slew of additional rules governing the three-minute video you will have to submit if your university has decided to take its competition online. Most of them are technical and logistical, and the

remainder are a repetition of the in-person rules mentioned above. We'll look at putting together a three-minute video later in the book, and will cover off the rules then, so don't sweat too much about them now.

Judgement day

When you deliver your Three Minute Thesis you will be presenting to an audience consisting predominantly of three groups – your peers and colleagues, members 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 just another part of the audience. Certainly, don't single 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 criteria (criteria which have recently been shortened and simplified):

Comprehension and Content

- Presentation provided clear motivation, background and significance to the research question;
- Presentation clearly described the research strategy/design and the results/findings of the research; and
- Presentation clearly described the

conclusions, outcomes and impact of the research.

Engagement and Communication

- The oration was delivered clearly, and the language was appropriate for a non-specialist audience;
- The PowerPoint slide was well-defined and enhanced the presentation; and
- The presenter conveyed enthusiasm for their research and captured and maintained the audience's attention.

The rules add that "Each criterion is equally weighted and has an emphasis on audience."

Every institution handles their judging differently and all attempt to make the process as fair and bias-free as possible. At ANU we have an ingenious system with a line along the top of the score sheet and a series of crosses on it to address the age-old problem of the judges having to keep the very first competitor in mind as, possibly nearly an hour later, they assess the performance of the last person to take the stage. If you're organizing a competition and are

interested in that, please just ask me. Always happy to chat.

But you have to remember that the judging process takes place in what often amounts to the blink of an academic eye, and there may not be time for even the most conscientious of judges to go carefully through the criteria - and any local variants - to give a fair and considered score. So, when I am briefing judging panels, I tend to encourage judges to reduce all this down to two very simple questions:

"What did they say?"

and

"How well 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' (I know; I hate that word too), not just a dry read of a text, but something more akin to a dramatic performance that brings the words to life and makes them ring in our ears long after you have finished speaking.

A while back 'positionality' snuck into the judging criteria, but then quietly disappeared when it was universally howled down by pretty much everyone involved in the competition. The idea was to have contestants discuss their personal commitment to their topic in relation to their social identities (gender, race, class, ethnicity, ability, geographic location, etc.).

It was a fine idea (actually, I am not so sure it was, to be honest), but it was deeply flawed because of the simple fact that not everyone is drawn to their research by some deep, personal feeling. For every scientific researcher looking for a cure to the terrible disease that took off a loved family member of theirs, there are ninety-nine other researchers who just love the thrill of the chase and the excitement of discovery.

So, if you have some personal attachment to

your topic, by all means use it in your presentation, but don't worry – you won't be assessed on it.

Who are we doing this for?

At its very essence, **3MT® is an exercise in effective communication**. Now to my mind, as soon as you put it in those terms, a very important rule kicks in; 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%, and quite possibly a lot more.

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.

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 really want to tackle this on your own? 3MT® can be a real challenge so you might like to think about assembling a pit crew or support team (I added 'support team' recently as increasingly people seemed not to know what a pit crew was. Interesting.) — a small group of friends or colleagues who will give you honest and critical feedback ("Great opening line, but the purple floral shirt sucks big time." or "Post-colonial deconstructed ontological discourse? You can't say that! No-one will have the faintest clue what you're talking about.") as you progress through the competition.

Those outside eyes and ears can really make a difference. And, even though 3MT® is a competition, as far as the participants are concerned, it is as collegiate as it is competitive. Which means there's nothing wrong with having a pit crew made up of your fellow competitors.

Stage One: Pre-production

We'll get to your in-person or on-screen presentation soon, 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 a number of factors over which you have varying degrees of control in the pre-production phase. In your live presentation they are:

the venue
the technology – mostly the mic
the judges
how you look
how you sound

Whereas on screen they are:

the technology – audio, video and lighting
how you look on screen
how you sound on screen

Let's take them one by one — some are

elements over which you have little or no say, but with which you need to become familiar, whereas others are elements over which you have total control.

The main aim with these first three in-person factors — the venue, the technology and the judges — is to become as familiar and comfortable as possible with the situation in which you will be speaking.

I should also point out that what we are looking here is not limited to your Three Minute Thesis competition entry, but actually applies to any time you are asked to stand up and speak in front of an audience.

Academia is still littered with a lot of fairly average, sometimes even poor public speakers; I am sure you've seen more than your fair share – they stumble onto the stage with their notes and their shopping under their arm, they show the same cluttered, under-designed slides they've been using for ages and ramble on in a monotone.

If you can rise above the crowd and become

known as an exciting, dramatic and engaging speaker, that certainly can't harm your academic career.

So let's look at them one by one.

The venue

If you're going to take the competition seriously, you need to find out where the heat, semi-final or final that you are to take part in is going to take place. Then you should 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. This is actually quite crucial to the extent that, if I am teaching interstate or overseas, I will arrange to arrive a day early to have a quick look. And, if it really is impossible to get into the venue beforehand (scored that elusive gig to speak in The White House or The Kremlin?!), there are always photos, plans and

room booking sites online for you to peruse.

And, if all else fails, find someone who has already given a talk in the venue and ask them what it was like. There really is no excuse for being unprepared.

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.

One trick I learned from my early years in touring theatre was that the first thing performers will often do when arriving at a new venue is to go and sit in the audience seating – at the back, in the front row, on the far right and on the far left. You want to see what your audience sees, rather than what you see. It's a bit of an extension of the 49:51 rule, but in visual terms. Only when you have done that do you go and stand on the stage.

When I am talking about familiarity with a venue, I always give one example which illustrates the point perfectly; I once had to speak in a venue which was designed by an architect on serious drugs. OK, I don't know that for sure, but when you hear what the venue was like, I am sure you will at least share my suspicions. Imagine a large octagonal room, across which are scattered a series of hexagonal and heptagonal pods, some large, some small, some raised, some lowered. Then around the walls of the room imagine one large screen, then a couple of small screens side by side, then a huge projection screen, then a mid-sized screen, and so on, all hung at disconcertingly different heights. Finish it off with an orange paint job and carpet which must have borne the name 'swirly vomit' in the catalogue, and you have the world's most challenging venue to speak in.

Apart from the sheer oddness and ugliness of the design, what was the hardest thing to work with was the complete lack of a focal point to speak from. The array of assorted screens gave no clue to this and the way the pods the audience was sitting in were arranged meant that there was nowhere in the room where you

weren't addressing the backs of the heads of at least half the crowd.

How you deal with a venue like that is up to you - I found myself dancing around more than a bit and 'doing the room' in a very 'cocktail reception on steroids' kinda way - but the key point is that, if I hadn't done a site inspection the day before, I would have been completely thrown off by the venue and would have wasted the start of my presentation while my brain hastily worked out what to do, and my eyes tried not to show panic or fear!

The technology

This is mostly, as far as a live 3MT® presentation is concerned, the microphone that you will use. All other technology, such as the lighting or the projection of your slide, will be someone else's responsibility so you needn't worry about them.

And, once again, this is an exercise in becoming familiar with the environment in which you will be performing. None of the technology should come as a surprise to you as, as a good 3MT® competitor, you will have asked ahead – "Will we

be using mics on the day? We will? OK, what sort will we be using?"

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 (that's 15 cms for you younger kids) from the mic 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 mic' and not be heard. If you are thinking about taking the mic off the stand, always ask if this will be OK first and if you do, be very careful not to get entangled in or, worse still, trip yourself up with the cable that inevitably will snake across the stage in the most inconvenient places.

And never, repeat never try to be a rock star or a standup comedian by picking up the microphone stand and walking around with it, or standing slightly to the side of it, mic in one hand, the other arm draped casually over the stand.

In fact, a very good rule for any performer is, unless you have been specifically invited by a

qualified grown-up to touch the microphone, never, ever touch the microphone. If you stand up to speak at an event and the first thing you do is fiddle with the microphone, you just end up looking unprofessional, and you only succeed in annoying the sound technician who is the one person in the venue who can make you sound good.

Wireless, hand-held (a bit like an ice-cream cone) — the same distance rules apply, but as the mic is in your hand and you are pointing it at your mouth, it's very hard to go off mic with this one. However, just be aware that you'll lose the use of one of your hands for gesturing in this situation so, if your presentation culminates with a version of the "the fish that got away was this big" story, you're in deep water (sorry – couldn't resists that), to put it mildly.

The bug - wired or wireless - also called a lapel mic or a Lavalier mic, which is the little bug-sized (hence the nickname) thing they pin on newsreaders, usually on a lapel or shirt collar. Just make sure you don't brush this one during your performance – it's easily done – and avoid wearing dangly jewelry that could get tangled

with it or, worse still, rub against it while you are speaking. This would be both acoustically unfortunate but also quite ironic as the mic gets its name from a piece of 17th century pendant jewelry, the *lavallière* necklace.

Synthetic fibres can be a problem here, but let's just assume you'd never be seen dead outside the house wearing nylon and you'll be fine. Actually, I think that may well be a good rule for life too.

Probably the most important thing to think about with this one is the fact that the mic comes with a small transmitter pack that will need to be hidden about your person. The cable will be threaded down the back of your shirt and the transmitter pack will be tucked into a belt or a pocket somewhere out of sight. So, dress accordingly because, if they've got nowhere else to put it, you might find a sound technician with cold hands shoving it roughly under the elastic on your underwear or gaffer taping it to your person. Not a great feeling just before you have to go out and give the performance of your life, I'm sure you'll agree.

The boom, over-the-ear, headset, (the 'Madonna' mic) — these are a bit of a mixed blessing; many of the big venues use these and, if you ever get to give a TED talk, this is the sort of thing you'll use. They are great in that the mic is about as close as it's ever going to get to your mouth and will move with you. You'll never go off mic.

A hook goes over one ear, a wire snakes around the back of your head, a second hook goes over the other ear and then the mic is tucked neatly next to your mouth on the thinnest of wire supports. This means the mic is close to invisible, the sound is pretty near perfect, and, as I said before, it is absolutely impossible to wander off mic.

However, if you've never worn one of these before, it can feel quite uncomfortable until you get used to it. And, even though it's so small that we might not see it from the audience, the mic itself can appear in your peripheral vision, a bit like one of those annoying flies that just won't leave you alone. And, again, it usually involves a transmitter pack that needs to go somewhere.

The trick, of course, is that when you start speaking, you should not be encountering whichever mic you are using for the first time. When you email or call ahead and are told you'll be wearing a headset mic, for example, ask if you can come a little early and try it on. Call it a soundcheck if you want to appear professional. Walk around with it on muttering "one, two … one, two" and get comfortable. It won't take long and the familiarity you develop will make a huge difference to your performance. Plus, if you ask for a sound check, the technicians will think you are a real pro.

Unfortunately there is – as with many things in life sadly – a bit of a gender thing going on with mics. Most microphones, certainly those that require a transmitter pack of some sort, look to have been designed to sit very nicely on the belt of a good, old-fashioned bloke in a suit, but not so neatly on his colleague in a dress. All I can suggest is forewarned is forearmed – find out in advance what mic you'll be using on the day and dress/plan accordingly.

And never question the need for a microphone – "Do I really have to wear this thing?" Firstly,

that's not your call to make. There will be a sound technician who knows what they are doing who can tell you quite categorically that you do need a microphone, even if you did spend fifteen years in the local debating society and were always known for your fine, booming voice.

And secondly don't assume the mic needed is for amplification. Sure, that's the most common function of a microphone on stage, but there are all sorts of other things it can do – recording, transmitting to a hearing aid loop, sending sound to a sealed room (cry baby session, anyone?) and so on. Do you really need to wear this thing? Yes, I am afraid you do. Get used to it!

With all mics - whether they are on a stand, in your hand, pinned to your clothes or over your ear — there are two golden rules. We've already met the first one - don't touch them! Ever! This makes a horrible noise and looks unprofessional. And, secondly, always assume all microphones are always 'on.' Many a politician has come to a sticky end by assuming a mic is off and I'd hate you to be overheard muttering unflattering comments about your judging panel just before

taking to the stage. Not the best way to get a high score, I can assure you!

There is, of course, the possibility that — particularly in a small room — 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. Take a deep breath, point the speaking mechanism (i.e. your mouth) where you want the sounds to be heard and start talking. Remember that sound travels in waves just like light. You could shine a torch at the back of a dark room and illuminate it – why not do the same with your voice?

The judges

This is another familiarity-only factor to bear in mind.

Before you begin your heat, you should find out who will be on your judging panel. Usually it's three or four people, although the further you get along the competition, the larger the panels tend to get. As always – ask! Universities are small places, and the chances are high that you will know, or at least recognize, some or all of

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.

The judges will probably sit somewhere towards the front of the audience, but this isn't always the case. However, wherever they are, while you should make sure they get some eye contact during your presentation, don't make a special case out of them. Having sat on a judging panel where a competitor decided to present the whole talk to the judges with knowing glances and winks, but hardly a glance at the rest of the audience, I can tell you it can feel pretty uncomfortable, and is not going to win you any extra marks.

How you look

You will 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 an intensive, day-long 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 them 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 at the job interview conveys that sense of professionalism and sends the message that you are the best person for the job, so the right look for your Three Minute Thesis performance will convey very similar messages to the audience and, more importantly, the judges. As an aside: I once got into trouble for using the gender-specific suit and tie reference here. Ugh! Did you not see Brad and Angelina at the 2014 BAFTAs?! You know what I mean.

But you also need to feel comfortable in what you are wearing – if you're not a formal look

kinda person, and importantly your field is not necessarily known for its formality, wear what feels right and looks best. I've seen competitors from business schools and colleges of surgeons look very flash in expensive suits, but equally I've seen competitors look very good in a more casual look. I once even saw a guy who must have been at least two metres tall, with a huge mop of unruly hair and who looked like he'd been dragged through the proverbial hedge backwards. He was Hagrid, I tell you! Unironically, he was actually doing research into hedgerows and looked absolutely perfect for the part. And no, I'm not making this up!

How you sound

It's important that you sound absolutely at your best from the moment you begin your 3MT® presentation. This is another area where how you deliver your speech is just as important as its content.

If your voice is even the slightest bit croaky, try any of the variations on good, old-fashioned honey and lemon, or that favourite of opera singers a small nip of brandy (just make sure you

have gum or mints handy in this case — that's a very different subliminal message you probably 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. It tells us you are not 100% confident and are unsure of what you are saying. Of course, this is probably untrue, but remember we are dealing with perception not reality here.

The key to sounding good is to warm up. This can be as little or as much as you've got time for, but it's important that your voice is purring smoothly like a well-tuned engine when it's time to speak. We've all had those working-from-home days when you don't speak to a soul for hours on end and eventually, when someone does come home, your response to "How's your day been?" comes out as a strangled squeak. That's an extreme example, but also a perfect illustration of why you need to warm up your vocal chords before speaking.

The technology – on screen (audio, video and lighting)

When you are preparing something as important as your 3MT® video for submission, and are thinking about the technology, the golden rule has to be: buy, beg, steal or borrow … the best. The very best! And, just as it's much easier to prepare an in-person presentation, if you have a pit crew to support you, it's also much easier to work with technology if you have people who understand that technology to help you out. This is where contestants with teenage kids have a distinct advantage! In an ideal world, your university will have a fancy, high tech. media studio where a bevy of talented technicians will run around, making you look good and sound good, and ensuring your video is formatted perfectly. But these days 'domestic' technology is so good that it's not hard to achieve the same result at home.

First, you need to think about 'location' – a nice, clean white wall looks OK, but let's make sure it is perfectly clean – you'd be surprised what the camera sees that your eyes don't. Then you need

to light 'the set'. Notice how we are using film production terms here? We really are making an exciting short drama about your research. Sure, it won't win any Oscars, but there's no excuse for underproduced, badly executed presentations. And, while the judging criteria emphasise that you are being assessed on your presentation and communication skills, not your production values, it is hard for even the most fair-minded of judges to be excited by a dingy video shot in an unlit room with all sorts of crackles and pops peppered throughout the soundtrack.

Once you have your hands on the tech, if you haven't managed to find yourself a tech-savvy helper, you need to learn how to use it and then practise, practise, practise. We're here to make a stunning video – we don't have time to learn on the job so when you are ready to call "Action!", you need to be across everything the technology can do for you.

One useful tip for all video making is to always **look with the monitor** and **listen with headphones**. Our brains are both very clever but also overly kind to us. They help us stay focused

by drawing our attention to the action in the centre of the screen (but not, for example, what might be happening on the edge of the frame) and they let us hear what we are expecting to hear – in this case your 3MT® speech - (but send unwanted sounds like next door's kids playing in the back yard into the background).

If you're out recording video in the field and don't look with the monitor and listen with headphones, you risk missing the dog behaving inappropriately in the background, not to mention the buzzing of a light plane passing overhead while you are speaking to camera. Not massive distractions, I agree, but enough for your audience to take their eyes off the prize for a split second. And you really don't want that – as a communicator (and here comes another golden rule of communication) you should be aiming for 100% of your audience's attention 100% of the time and nothing less.

Getting the lighting right is a very easy way to make your video presentations really 'pop.' I go so far as to light all my Zoom calls and Teams

meetings, but I do tend to be a bit obsessive about things.

I'd suggest finding out about film and TV lighting – the Internet is full of easy-to-follow instructions. Then get yourself a key light, a fill light or reflector, and a back light and you're definitely ready for your close up.

The key is to experiment – look in the monitor or make and review test recordings and keep moving things around until you are happy with how the shot looks. The main aims here are to make sure you look your best and to separate yourself from the background.

If money, time or resources are a problem, just get yourself one big light – the biggest you can find - and bounce it off the ceiling. The soft light that reflects off every surface in the room and cascades down on you like gentle rain will have you and your environment looking beautiful in no time.

And just beware of what are called colour temperatures – while they all look white to the naked eye, different kinds of lights have different

colour temperatures – so try to avoid mixing different lighting types (LED, incandescent, fluoro, neon, etc.) unless you want to look like you're broadcasting live from the fairground.

How you look on screen

The rules for what you should wear to look your best on screen are pretty much the same as in person with a few extras thrown in; the good news is that you can check everything you wear in the monitor.

Wearing bright red used to be problematic, but camera quality has improved hugely over the years, so we don't need to worry too much about that. But there are better colours you can wear to look your best in front of the camera.

Don't wear anything that might physically or acoustically interfere with the sound – jewelry that hangs where you are going to place the mic will need to be relocated (or the mic might need to move) otherwise you risk all sorts of scratching and rattling noises. And even a wrist full of bangles can make distracting sounds, especially when you gesture dramatically to

emphasise a point.

Synthetic fabrics were always a big no-no because of the potential for static electricity, but again technology (both audio and synthetic fabric production!) have come a long way. Still, you look better in cotton and wool, you know you do, so let's just stick to that.

How you sound on screen

This is no different to the 'make sure you warm up your voice' advice from before, but with the added advantage that you can always do one take, listen to yourself and say "Ugh, I sound terrible – let's do that again."

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 your 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. This still applies if your judging panel consists of academics, even quite senior ones; while everyone is a specialist in his or her field, they rarely know much about other areas, sometimes even areas that are quite close to their own.

Crucially, this means not dumbing down your content and not patronizing 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.

However, even though you need to write a script, you don't want to give a rote recital of it. By all means, become 100% familiar with it, learn it word for word if that helps, but when you actually present, don't give us a reading of a script that you are following in your head. If you do that, it can sound very stilted and wooden, your attention is never totally in the moment and, in the worst examples I have seen, the contestant screws their eyes half shut and reads what I like to think of as 'the autocue in the sky.'

Instead, use cue cards, or bullet points or other mental signposts that remind you of what you want to say, but don't tie you down to ever last

word. Firstly, this will make your delivery sound much more natural, but it will also make it much easier to pick up from where you left off if you have 'a moment' mid-speech and forget what you are saying.

One of my theories of successful communication is that it always works best if it replicates what is going on between you and your audience when you sit down for a coffee and a chat with a friend. You are barely a metre apart, you are at the same eye level, it's a relaxed and casual situation with no pressure on either of you, and it can even be quite intimate. No matter how many people are in the room (real or virtual), if that's the feeling you manage to convey, your communication will be much more effective. You will be a much better speaker if you are relaxed, and your audience will be more receptive to what you have to say.

The other thing to remember is that, despite the script being crucial, it is not just about the words. I've seen claims that the verbal content of a delivery is somewhere around 35% of the story, but the remaining 65% is taken up by facial expressions, the tone of your voice, your body

language, any physical movement, your appearance, eye contact, and your gestures and posture. I am not sure how you quantify this exactly, but try delivering a speech with your hands behind your back and your eyes closed in a dull monotone, and you'll soon see the truth in this.

And lastly – a gift for you; when I give people this next piece of advice, it can be eye-opening, it can be liberating, it can even change lives. OK, maybe that last one is a bit of a reach, but it's definitely something worth saying. Here goes …

Public speaking is jazz, not classical. I repeat: it's jazz, not classical.

So, what do I mean by that? Well, if you think about a classical musical audience, they are generally at a concert because they want to hear a specific piece of music played. It's their favourite Mozart symphony, for example, and they've listened to it so many times they practically know it note for note, off by heart.

They sit there anticipating every musical phrase, every note and are as thrilled by the familiarity of

the piece as they are the dexterity and virtuosity of the players.

A jazz audience, on the other hand, has no idea what is coming next; every note is improvised on the night and, if the musicians are any good, everything the audience hears changes from performance to performance.

If you get mistakes, with classical music, if the second violinist had the oysters before the concert and they weren't at their freshest, for example, when they slip with their bow and play a note that is just the tiniest fraction off, everyone in the audience hears it. It will grate on their ears. In the very binary world of classical music, that note is wrong.

With jazz musicians, however, where no one knows what is coming next, there can be no wrong notes. Every single note played is, as far as both the players and the audience are concerned, 100% right.

What does that mean for you? Well, your audience is very much like the jazz audience – they have absolutely no idea what you are going

to say next. Which, of course, means every single thing you say has to be right. So, unless you come out with those fateful words “I’m sorry, I’ve made a mistake.”, everything that comes out of your mouth is correct. No more worrying about forgetting things, or making mistakes, or getting the odd, little detail wrong. How does that make you feel? Confidence boosted or what?! You’re welcome.

The 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 that this sort of writing can have, just go and read any good journalism – something like *The New Yorker*, say – or even a writer of good 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 so using more words than is necessary is basically a waste of time. 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 seems to be to enhance that sense of exclusivity which academia thrives on. However, when you're speaking to a non-specialist audience there is nothing worse than making your audience feel excluded 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 someone outside your field might not understand and, if you can really find no alternative word, then qualify or explain what it is you are talking about. Which brings us to …

Qualifying unknown concepts, people, places, etc.— never make assumptions about the audience for your 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 too." Wrong! And not just wrong, but also lazy.

With names, for example, there are very few people who are universally known; once you get past the Pope, Madonna or Elvis, then anyone of lesser celebrity probably needs some sort of qualification when you refer to them while speaking to a non-academic audience. So, you might know that Dame Janet Fortescue-Smythe, OBE is the leading authority in your field, but the rest of us will almost certainly have never heard of her or her earth-shattering discoveries. This means you need to qualify her when you introduce her — "Dame Janet Fortescue-Smythe, one of the world's leading authorities on ... etc." Afterwards, by all means namedrop her as often as you like, but the first time around tell us who she 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.

I used to do a joke at this point that went: "If you use the phrase 'ontological discourse' in your presentation, it would be much easier to have a T-shirt made that says I AM A WANKER". But these days I am much too classy to do that. Forget I even said it.

Now, when it gets to putting pen to paper, 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.

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 with dialogue — 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.

And, while we are the subject of comedy, **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 — the righteously funny drunken porter scene in MacBeth makes the discovery of the bloodied corpse of the king that follows so much more shocking. But make sure you use your humour carefully and be prepared to deliver it well.

And remember – humour doesn't necessarily mean jokes. Being humorous and telling a good

joke are two very different skillsets – the first most people can do quite well, the second is a fairly rare commodity. Don't forget that, if you do well in the competition, you may well end up reciting the same story or anecdote or telling 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 line 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 or third 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 it is to write two minutes' worth and then pad it out to three. Cutting back, distilling and crystallizing 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 loud. Put simply – while your eyes are forgiving, your ears are highly critical.

Use a '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 Melbourne University's Hossein Mokhtarzadeh brought knee injuries to life with a few topical references to the World Cup!

And, if we are referring to journalism, we probably should quickly look at **the five Ws and an H**. This is basically journalism 101 with a touch of psychology thrown in – apparently the human brain is hard-wired to need to know the answers to the questions:

WHO?
WHERE?
WHEN?
WHAT?
WHY?
HOW?

In fact, we are so keen to know these answers that, if what we are listening to or reading doesn't satisfy that need, our brains will go for a little mental wander in search of the answers. So, you might be holding forth about the amazing things you have unearthed in your research, but a little voice in my head will be distracting me with "Mmnnn … she didn't say when that was; was it historic, do you think, or contemporary? What did it actually happen?" And so on. Remember – 100% of the audience's attention 100% of the time?

So make sure you always tell me who, where, when, what, why and how and we should be fine. In fact, the five Ws and an H are actually the skeleton of every story so you'll need to be using them as the building blocks of your narrative anyway if you want to tell a really well rounded and satisfying story.

And lastly – **the hourglass structure**. I always think a good Three Minute Thesis presentation can be divided into three sections that correspond to the top, middle and bottom of an hourglass (akin to the traditional beginning, middle and end). We start wide at the top with the big picture, the background and the context. Then we focus in on you and your research and finally we open up again to look at the outcomes and the future.

In terms of how much attention each section gets, I think you need a bit of a sliding scale; the opening can have between 30 and 60 seconds, the main body between 60 and 120 seconds, and the last section another 30 to 60 seconds. Exactly how much each part gets depends on your research – if, for example, you are looking at

climate change, you only need mention two words ('climate' and 'change' in case you hadn't guessed) and your audience is instantly up to speed and you can talk in more detail. If, on the other hand, your research is into a minor Italian painter from the fifteenth century, who worked in Florence and used the medium of natural dyes on pig skin to make biting political caricatures, then you will need to background us a little more. As with most of the communication process, it involves you putting yourself into the minds of the audience.

And, in a slightly ironic way, the best place you can start in all this is the end. **Ask yourself: what is your take home message?** What is the one thing that you want your audience, and more importantly your judges, to remember? Think about it – if you are the first competitor to take the stage, or the first video they have to watch, you want them to still be thinking about you and talking about how amazing you were by the time they get to the last contestant. You need to stick in their heads.

The best way to plan for this is to come up with that all-important take home message and then

write towards it. Which makes sense – while writing fiction can be a voyage of discovery (you really are allowed to sit in front of a blank page or screen and just let anything happen), writing non-fiction, which is what your 3MT® script is, is a planned journey from A to B. And, as with any planned journey, if you don't have a destination in mind, you risk getting hopelessly lost.

So imagine your take home message as the destination in your mental sat nav and set your route towards it.

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, very important – editing is actually *more* important. Yes – you've guessed it - editing is at least 51% of the equation, with writing at the very most 49%.

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. In fact, the more you write and then cut back accordingly, the better the final result will be.

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 can't quite remember what they Are supposed to say next. 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 here's an idea - 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! The surviving three minutes will be so much stronger than if you had just started out by writing three minutes' worth and stopping.

Meanwhile, back at editing; in its simplest form editing is all about checking little things like:

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. In fact, to be really good at this, you need to develop two distinct personalities.

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*.
I often think as the editing process as a bit like a film camera doing a long, slow zoom in. You start with a huge shot of the heat-soaked, desert landscape and then go closer and closer in until you can see the whites of the bad guy's eyes.

Something like this …

overall structure [extreme wide shot]
structure of paragraphs [wide shot]
structure/effectiveness of individual sentences [mid shot]
individual words [close up]
punctuation [extreme close up]

Then you go back over your text looking at …

clarity and meaning
style and spine [a publishing term, the spine is what holds the whole thing together – in a way, the glue]

Very importantly, **you should always edit when you have finished, <u>never before</u>**. 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! 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.

Remember the two personalities? You need to start developing them as separate entities in the same body, if you can. This is not as hard as it sounds and will get easier 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 focused, 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 realize that editing is not an afterthought. It is so much more than a quick tidy up at the end and is, as I said before, 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 one 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 a frequently quoted essay called ***Politics and the English Language***, which seems to be widely and readily available on the Internet. A lot of the sites seem to be Russian so whether that's legal or not, I am not so sure.

By the time 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.

Always 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 and reinforce your message by having a slide projected behind you in person or on screen if you're presenting on video. 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. Only with less walking, of course.

So, if your presentation is Brooks' 'act of theatre' – 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 in terms of text 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 sponsors 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 the words you use 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, and

very little more is all that 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 a 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. Death by PowerPoint, as it is often known. 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 patronizing – we're all big boys and girls and can read (hell, we can probably even do joined up writing by now too) so we don't need any help with that, thank you very much.

Keep it simple — a slide can be too busy, it really can – think clean, clear images with minimal text that is typeset in a striking font. Nothing more. Probably one of the best 3MT® slides I have ever seen was for a talk on a near-extinct language in Tibet. While the speaker wowed us with her words, in the background was a beautiful image of a village on a Tibetan mountainside shrouded in mist 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.

Fonts can communicate information too – your choice of font can help (or, if you get it wrong, hinder) the communication process so choose your fonts wisely. A line of text in a casual sans serif font, for example, says something completely different to the same text in a more formal serif font. And, while we are talking about fonts, let's not have too many different fonts either – emboldening, italicizing, etc. will give you variety, but if you start piling up the fonts, you risk your slide looking like a poster made by a rabid 1980s anti-vaxxer.

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 presenter did it, the person operating the laptop and projector thought there had been a mistake so hastily advanced to the next speaker's slide (resulting in a talk about saving babies' lives being illustrated by an engineering diagram of a bridge) 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!

If you need inspiration for your slide, have a wander around your local shopping centre and look at the visual merchandising going on there. Big corporations will have serious amounts of invested time, money and resources into communicating information to you visually, so why not learn from them?

Role models

So who should you be looking to emulate when you present your Three Minute Thesis? You shouldn't have to look too far to find great examples of people who can speak well, accessibly and in a lively, intelligent and engaging manner. I think TV presenters and newsreaders (particularly those from non-commercial or public television stations) are good role models, as are the classic public intellectuals who regularly appear in the media to give commentary on current affairs.

If you need inspiration, have a look at the program of your local writers' or ideas festival. Who have they put on the main stage to give the keynote address? Chances are that'd be your role model right there!

My favourite role models at the moment are good stand-up comedians – not the sort who just tell boring, old-fashioned 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**, **Hannah Gadsby** or **Ricky Gervais**, for example.

What not to do

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

So, just to make sure you don't get a red card or are shown the door for a misdemeanor, make sure you keep the following in mind:

Costumes — just dress as though you were going for a three-minute job interview, OK? You don't need to dress any fancier than that. Lucky socks are OK, but 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 balloon animals!

Slide transitions and animations — don't even think about it. Not even a tiny, sneaky, automatic one. If your slide so much as changes one pixel — you know what will happen; just make sure you close the door behind you as you leave!

Muttering — if we can't understand you, we can't give you a good mark, can we? 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.

It also helps you with being heard clearly if you aren't using a microphone – addressing the carpet or the ceiling risks your words floating off into the ether unheard.

Sex, religion and politics — the three great dinner party conversation starters/stoppers. OK, not a strict no-no, but just remember: you don't know anything about the audience's or the judges' belief systems, morals, ethics, standards, etc. so, if you raise these subjects, tread carefully. It doesn't mean you can't touch upon them, just tread 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’. Or get one of your pit crew members to stand behind you and poke you with a stick or gently tap you on the shoulder every time you do this. 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 try to avoid looking like an operatic tenor on steroids. If you need a benchmark, go back to good on-screen TV talent such as foreign correspondents for that one. Watch how they walk towards the camera using gestures to emphasise key parts of their report, but without distracting from the point they are making.

Really, **a good presentation should be you, plus 10%** - that’s 10% in terms of voice, gestures, etc. We just need a slightly more theatrical version of the real you, but not an over-the-top caricature.

And **variety is definitely the spice of life** for an effective 3MT® delivery – make sure you vary your tone, pace, volume, sentence length, in fact everything. A presentation that is completely serious, or totally played for laughs, or delivered at the same volume, or consisting of either all short sentences or, just as bad, all long sentences will very quickly bore your audience. Vary it up, keep them guessing, and you will have their undivided attention for the whole of those precious three minutes.

What you are aiming for

As unique and individual as every 3MT® presentation is, there are a few things that seem to define a successful one – certainly if the many I have seen over the years are anything to go by.

If you want to be up there on the medals podium, I think you should be aiming to be:

Confident – even for the shyest, most diffident amongst us, this shouldn't be that hard simply because confidence can be developed through practice. It really is as simple as that. So, the more you prepare, the more confident you will get. Put simply: you cannot practise too much.

Calm – calm is also an easy one. Think about it: if you've done all your homework and preparation, there is very little that can go wrong. And, if you're really good, you will have thought about and anticipated everything that could possibly go wrong and thought through how you would deal with every possible scenario. Once you've done that little mental exercise, it's actually quite easy to be calm.

Likeable – or, as I like to think of it, just be yourself. Remember that the audience for your V presentation is a non-academic audience so no-one is out to get you! And, more than that, they are as interested in you as they are in what you have to say. So, relax, take a deep breath and just show us the real you.

Humble – 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. Again, a lot of this just means showing us the real you.

Genuine – this one goes without saying; you're a researcher talking about their work. What could be more genuine that that? You shouldn't have to try too hard on this one.

Credible – again: no problems here. You're an expert and you know what you're talking about. How can you not be credible?!

Authoritative – this is the same as credible. You've done your research, you know what you are talking about and we all are keen to hear. Your authority on the subject is a given.

In control – in a way, this is the sum of all the previous factors. Get everything right in advance, do your homework on the logistics, and you can't help but be in control on the day.

A few tricks for a better 3MT®

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

Do three minutes on anything – before you even get onto your research, try talking about absolutely anything for three minutes. When I train people, I 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 have the competitors 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, you could even turn it into a bit of a light-hearted competition. I well remember the media department of Singapore's leading science agency coming along to photograph the country's top scientists being trained by me in science communication only to discover them spontaneously holding forth for 60 seconds on the topic of their favourite ice-cream. Magic!

In my early days I grew up listening to a great

British radio show called *Just a Minute* that worked on similar lines – some of the greatest comedians around at the time would improvise sixty seconds on just about anything with just three simple rules:

no repetition
no hesitation
no deviation

Next **try three, unrehearsed, ad libbed minutes on your topic** – before you put pen to paper and move on to your prepared 3MT® speech, try improvising your content. 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 with three minutes. Secondly, we're feeling our way around our topic in an informal way, becoming comfortable talking about it in public 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. What parts do they get excited about? What parts make their eyes glaze over? Use their reactions to gauge which parts of your research make for riveting content and which bits are best left out.

Then **do three minutes of questions and answers** – again this is still before you put pen to paper or lay a finger on the keyboard. Gather your troops and tell them "I'm going to talk about [whatever your topic happens to be] so tell me: what would you like to know?" Not only is this yet more practice at standing in front of people and talking, but the sorts of questions that your team will ask will act as more market research to help you decide what the most interesting or exciting parts of your research story are.

And lastly **talk to the audience from hell** – this one happens once you've written your speech and performed it a few times. I've noticed that everyone seems to assume they will be speaking in ideal circumstances – a nice, quiet audience, all eyes on you, door firmly closed with no latecomers or interruptions, that sort of thing. And nine times out of ten that's what you will

get. But unfortunately, it's not guaranteed. I've seen latecomers arriving noisily and people who leave halfway through someone's speech, doors that bang in the wind, phones that ring and people who take calls during a presentation, and crying babies and talkative toddlers. I even once watched as someone had to bravely keep going while a helicopter attempted a very difficult landing in high winds on the roof of an adjacent building. So, on the basis that it's best to be prepared for anything, get your pit crew to watch you and, as you talk, drop things on the floor, bang their chairs noisily, make or receive calls on their phones, arrive late or leave early. Really, anything they can come up with that could possibly disturb you is great. Your aim is to block all this out, focus on the one person that is giving you their full attention and give a perfect presentation.

Good luck (not that luck enters into it)!

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. Despite what actors get wished as they pass through the stage door, luck is never a factor here.

You've only got three minutes, so you need to make every second count. Plan your campaign, think about your audience, write a good script, practise its delivery obsessively and when you step out on stage (in the venue you have previously scoped out, of course), you will be brilliant! The same goes for your video presentation.

And, as easy as this is for me to say and as hard as it might be for you to do, make sure you have fun. If you are enjoying yourself, and if you are sharing your passion for your topic, that will flow through to your audience.

I hope this book has given you some ideas and has helped you get ready for the big day when you wow the assembled crowds with three pithy,

witty, clever and entertaining minutes on your research.

Good luck (sorry, can't help myself); I can't wait to see your 3MT® presentations and hear about the amazing research you are doing. But remember: you've only got three minutes and … your time starts now!

Index

2026 EDITION

3MT®

"In the world of 3MT® I can't think of anyone who has organised more competitions, trained more competitors or judged more presentations than Simon. And I know so many people who've been on the 3MT® journey for whom his experience and knowledge of the competition have been absolutely invaluable resources. It's no coincidence that he is often introduced as "the 3MT® guru". But, best of all, behind all this has always been a wicked sense of humour and an unwavering and highly infectious belief that standing and talking in front of large audiences can actually be fun. *Your Time Starts Now!* puts all this down in print and is essential reading for all potential 3MT® competitors."

Eamonn Fahy – 3MT® winner at Melbourne University, the Asia-Pacific Final, and the Universitas21 global competition.

THESIS WHISPERER BOOKS

9 780645 193725

SIMON CLEWS