

WIN

THE ART OF DEBATING,

EVERY

PERSUADING, AND

ARGUMENT

PUBLIC SPEAKING

MEHDI HASAN

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To my wife, the love of my life, and the only person I can never seem to win an argument with.

Introduction

THE ART OF THE ARGUMENT

I'm not arguing, I'm just explaining why I'm right.

—Anonymous

What would you do if tens of thousands of lives depended on *you* winning an argument?

In 428 BCE, Ancient Greece was in the midst of the Peloponnesian War. The city-states of Athens and Sparta were locked in all-out conflict, struggling for the upper hand. With the two powerhouses distracted, the tiny city of Mytilene, on the Greek island of Lesbos, saw an opportunity. The oligarchs in charge of the city wanted to throw off Athenian rule and make a push to take full control of the island. “Egged on” by their Spartan allies, the oligarchs launched what became known as the Mytilenean Revolt.

It was a disaster for the Mytileneans. Athens wasn't as distracted as the oligarchs had hoped. The Athenian forces besieged Mytilene from all sides, before the city was even ready for battle. And it crushed Mytilene's nascent insurrection. The Mytilenean leaders were forced to surrender to Athenian general Paches, but the general didn't take it upon himself to decide how to punish the rebels. Athens was still a democracy, after all. He allowed the defeated city to send a delegation of a thousand men to Athens to beg for mercy.

As the ancient Greek historian Thucydides narrates in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the Athenian assembly gathered to vote on what action to take against Mytilene. It didn't take long to decide. The Athenians were infuriated by the Mytilenean Revolt—and they were also afraid. What if other cities in their empire followed Mytilene's lead and rebelled against Athens? It would be the end of the Athenian empire.

The members of the assembly voted hurriedly and unanimously for a stark punishment—to execute all the men in Mytilene and to enslave the women and children. Straight after the vote, a trireme—the fastest ship of that era—was dispatched to Lesbos with orders for Paches: wipe out the adult male population of Mytilene.

By the next morning, however, many Athenians were second-guessing the sheer brutality they had voted to inflict on the people of Mytilene. They wanted to consider a

softer penalty. Athens being Athens, two orators were picked to debate the issue in front of the assembly.

The first was the general Cleon, described by Thucydides as “the most violent man at Athens,” who wanted to stick with the original punishment: killing and enslaving the Mytileneans. He addressed the assembly at length and urged his fellow Athenians to resist the calls for leniency. Cleon raged against Athenian democracy itself if it were to back down from the demands of war: “I have often before now been convinced that a democracy is incapable of empire, and never more so than by your present change of mind in the matter of Mytilene.” And he warned his listeners against becoming “very slaves to the pleasure of the ear, and more like the audience of a rhetorician than the council of a city.”

“Punish them as they deserve,” Cleon argued, “and teach your other allies by a striking example that the penalty of rebellion is death.”

Pity poor Diodotus. This leader of a more moderate Athenian political faction was tasked with making the case for clemency, and he had to speak right after Cleon’s rant. Thousands of lives hung in the balance—and time was not on his side. The trireme was already on its way to Lesbos. For that matter, Diodotus was now defending the soul of Athenian democracy, in the face of the vengeful anger of his opponents. Can you imagine the pressure he was under?

Despite that pressure, Diodotus began slowly, his calmness a stark contrast to Cleon’s rage: “I do not blame the persons who have reopened the case of the Mytileneans,” he said, “nor do I approve the protests which we have heard against important questions being frequently debated”—a dig at Cleon’s scorched earth tirade. Diodotus instead built his argument around the importance of free and open debate, warning his audience how “haste and passion” were the two biggest obstacles to “good counsel.”

For Diodotus, the case against a mass execution didn’t rest on the guilt or innocence of the Mytileneans. He conceded that they had indeed revolted against Athens—but he argued only for the oligarchical ringleaders to be punished. His was an argument of expediency, of *realpolitik*: killing *all* the Mytilenean men would not be in the “interests” of the Athenians. It would be a “blunder,” he said, to exclude rebels in other revolting cities “from the hope of repentance and an early atonement of their error.” Nor, he added, was there any evidence that a mass execution would act as a deterrent to future insurrections.

The coolheaded Diodotus knew his audience—and what they needed to hear. He also understood the importance of rational argument, and he set the tone for it, eloquently deflecting Cleon’s call for vengeance. “The good citizen,” argued Diodotus, “ought to triumph not by frightening his opponents but by beating them fairly in argument.”

“And beat Cleon he did,” notes one writer. The assembly voted again—and, this time, narrowly decided in Diodotus’s favor. A second trireme with new orders was then “sent off in haste” to Lesbos, writes Thucydides, with “wine and barley-cakes” provided to the oarsmen and “great promises made if they arrived in time.” Thankfully, their trireme pulled into port just as Paches was reading the original decree brought to him by the first ship. The massacre was prevented, with only moments to spare.

Thousands of innocent lives were saved. All thanks to a single argument made back in Athens. An argument that Diodotus was able to win because he excelled at the art of debating, persuading, and public speaking. He knew not just how to craft a reasoned argument but also how to compose himself under pressure. He knew how to reach his audience, in their hearts, their minds, and the very core of their identity. He knew how to roll with his opponent’s haymakers and pick the critical opening to strike back. And when he did, Diodotus knew exactly how to use Cleon’s weaknesses to his advantage. He knew how to go in the underdog and come out the victor.

The point of this book is to show you all the tools and tactics that Diodotus, and all the world’s greatest speakers and debaters, employed. So you, too, can win every argument. Even when thousands of lives *aren’t* riding on it.



Every single person on the face of the planet—every man, woman, and child—has, at some moment or another, *tried* to win an argument. Whether it is in the comments section on Facebook, or in the marble hallways of Congress, or at the Thanksgiving dinner table. Whether they’ve trounced their opponent or walked away sullen, everyone might then imagine all the things they could and should have said. We’ve all been there. We cannot escape the human urge, need, and—yes—desire to argue.

But arguing itself tends to get a bad rap. It’s blamed for everything from political polarization to marital breakdown. In his 1936 classic, *How to Win Friends & Influence People*, Dale Carnegie wrote: “I have come to the conclusion that there is only one way under high heaven to get the best of an argument—and that is to avoid it. Avoid it as you would avoid rattlesnakes and earthquakes.”

I take issue with Carnegie’s conclusion—if he were still alive, maybe we could debate it.

I prefer not to avoid arguments. I seek them out. Rush toward them. Relish and savor them.

I have been arguing my whole life, in fact. I’ve even made a career of it—first, as an op-ed columnist and TV pundit in the UK; then as a political interviewer for Al Jazeera English; and now as a cable anchor for MSNBC in the United States. I’ve argued with presidents, prime ministers, and spy chiefs from across the world. I’ve

argued inside the White House; inside Number 10 Downing Street; inside the ... Saudi embassy!

Philosophically, I consider argument and debate to be the lifeblood of democracy, as well as the only surefire way to establish the truth. Arguments can help us solve problems, uncover ideas we would've never considered, and hurry our disagreements toward (even begrudging) understanding. There are also patent practical benefits to knowing how to argue and speak in public. These are vital soft skills that allow you to advance in your career and improve your lot in life. There are very few things you cannot achieve when you have the skill and ability to change people's minds. Or to quote Winston Churchill, "Of all the talents bestowed upon men, none is so precious as the gift of oratory. He who enjoys it wields a power more durable than that of a great king."

But when it comes down to it, a good argument, made in good faith, can also simply be *fun*. I actually *enjoy* disagreeing with others, poking holes in their claims, exposing flaws in their logic. Maybe it makes me an outlier, but I happen to think there is intrinsic value to disagreement. I'm in the same camp as the nineteenth-century French essayist Joseph Joubert, who is said to have remarked: "It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it."

I learned this lesson early on. I was raised in, one might say, a disputatious household. To put it plainly: we Hasans love to argue! My father would challenge and provoke my sister and me at the dinner table, on long car journeys, on foreign holidays. He never shied away from an argument over the merits or demerits of a particular issue. It was he who taught me to question everything, to be both curious and skeptical, to take nothing on blind faith, and to relish every challenge and objection.

In the late 1980s, when British Muslims were denouncing Salman Rushdie's notorious Islamophobic novel *The Satanic Verses*, with some of them even burning copies of it on the streets of northern English cities, my father purchased a copy, read it cover to cover, and kept it in a prominent spot on his bookshelf. His Muslim friends would visit our home, see the book, and their eyes would bulge. "Why ... why ... would you buy that book?" they would splutter. "Because you can't dismiss something you haven't read," my father would calmly reply.

You could say my father is a living, breathing embodiment of the dictum outlined by John Stuart Mill in his classic philosophical treatise *On Liberty*:

He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.

I grew up appreciating the value of being able to “refute the reasons on the opposite side” and thereby learned to familiarize myself with both sides of any argument. It’s a skill I took with me first to university, where I debated at the Oxford Union alongside the great and the good of the British establishment, and then to a career in the UK and U.S. media where, in recent years, I have earned a reputation as one of the toughest interviewers on television.

There are millions of people across America, and the world, who want to learn how to win an argument, who are keen to improve their debating techniques, as well as master the art of public speaking in general—but who need a push.

You may be one of them. But why read this particular book to get that push? I’ll admit there are plenty of books already out there on how to argue or debate or give speeches that have been authored by academics and writers and debate coaches. Indeed, you’ll see that I cite from many of them in the pages and chapters ahead. But this book builds on my own unique set of experiences: from my student days debating with the likes of future British prime minister Boris Johnson and former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto, to the highlights from a career spent interviewing some of the biggest names from the worlds of politics, finance, and, yes, Hollywood.

So that’s reason number one: I’ve had to learn every debating technique in this book to be able to step in front of the camera and challenge leaders from around the globe.

But here’s an even bigger reason: while there are also, admittedly, plenty of books already out there that focus predominantly on the art of persuasion, or negotiation, or compromise, this book isn’t one of them. Simply put, this book is all about teaching you how *to win*.

So this book is intended as a practical guide—for trial lawyers who want to triumph in the courtroom; for corporate executives who want to dominate in the boardroom; for political candidates who want to run for office and win their TV debates; for teachers and lecturers who want to succeed in getting their point across; for students who want to excel in speech and debate tournaments or at Model UN; for spouses who ... well, you know the rest.

My goal is to turn you, the reader, no matter your background or ability, into a champion of debate, a master of rhetoric, a winner in the art of argument.

In the first section of the book, on the fundamentals, I’ll show you how to captivate an audience, distinguish between pathos and logos, and become a better listener as well as a better speaker. I’ll explain why humor is often key to winning a debate, and I’ll also mount a defense of the much-maligned ad hominem argument.

The second section will introduce you to time-tested tricks and techniques—from the “Rule of Three” to the “Art of the Zinger” to the “Gish Gallop”—and show you

how to wield and weaponize them in the real world. You'll come to recognize the value of a triad as well as the power of synchoresis—and also learn what Rambo has to contribute to the world of argument and debate.

The third section focuses on the work you need to conduct behind the scenes to ensure you're ready for prime time. I'll teach you how to build up your confidence, rehearse your delivery, and research your arguments. To me, there is nothing—*nothing!*—more important than practice and preparation.

Finally, there's the conclusion, or the "Grand Finale." How do you bring everything to a close? How do you leave your audience wanting more? I'll lay out the different ways to end a speech on a high—and with listeners on *your* side.

This book is chock-full of behind-the-scenes anecdotes and examples from my own debates—which have ranged from the Oxford Union in England to Kyiv in Ukraine. I'll share secrets from my televised bouts with the likes of Erik Prince, John Bolton, Michael Flynn, Douglas Murray, Slavoj Žižek, Steven Pinker, and Vitali Klitschko, among many others. I'll also unpack lessons on the art of rhetoric from luminaries ranging from the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle to the British comedian John Cleese to the Barbadian pop star Rihanna.

People often ask me: "Can what you do really be taught?"

The short answer is: yes.

The longer answer is: yes, if you have the right teacher and are willing to listen, learn, and put in the hours.

Anyone can win an argument.

Let me teach you how.

Part One

THE FUNDAMENTALS

WINNING OVER AN AUDIENCE

Designing a presentation without an audience in mind is like writing a love letter and addressing it “to whom it may concern.”

—Ken Haemer, design expert

It was a cold, wintry evening in rural southwest England in February 2012. I had been invited to join BBC Radio 4’s flagship political panel show, *Any Questions?* The show is broadcast in front of a live audience that is allowed to ask questions of the panelists, who tend to be a mix of politicians and pundits.

That night we were in the small town of Crewkerne—population seven thousand—and, as I walked onstage at the Wadham Community School, I turned to scan the audience in the hall. The house was packed, but it took only three words to describe the whole of the crowd: *elderly, white, conservative*.

I leaned over to fellow panelist David Lammy, a Black Labour member of Parliament, and whispered: “We may be the only people of color, and the only people under the age of forty, in this entire room.”

As the show began, so did the contentious political arguments. One of the big stories in the news that week was the fate of extremist preacher Abu Qatada, a Jordanian asylum-seeker who had been dubbed “Osama bin Laden’s spiritual ambassador to Europe” and held in the UK without trial for a decade. The Conservative-led coalition government wanted to have Abu Qatada deported to Jordan—despite a credible fear that he might be tortured by the authorities back in Amman. And, on just the second question of the night, a member of the audience rose and asked about the issue directly: “Should the British government ignore the instruction of the European Court of Human Rights and simply deport Abu Qatada to Jordan?”

My mind was racing. I was in the hot seat, center stage. I knew that millions were listening on the radio, many of whom would agree with my own liberal stance: Abu Qatada should be tried in the UK and not tortured in Jordan. But how could I convince the *Daily Mail*-reading, conservative audience facing me down in Crewkerne? How could I get them on board with my argument?

When the questioner had spoken, the audience had clapped rousingly. They seemed to want Abu Qatada gone! I knew that if I simply cited reports from Amnesty International or the articles of the European Convention on Human Rights, I would

lose this crowd. Instead, I had to adapt my usual liberal arguments and appeal to what I knew that particular audience would value and cherish—namely, British tradition, British history.

So, when host Jonathan Dimbleby came to me for an answer to that provocative question from the audience, this is how I answered. I said it was “absurd” to claim Abu Qatada could not be prosecuted in a UK court. Why?

The bigger point for me is the principle. When I was in school—we’re in a school—I learned about the Magna Carta; I learned about trial by jury; I learned about habeas corpus; I learned about free speech. The “glorious history of liberty” in this country. And I find it amazing that twenty years later, such is the pernicious impact of the “War on Terror” that I have to come back on a program like this, I have to go into TV studios, and debate certain journalists, and say, “Wait a minute, what happened to those liberties? Why have we suddenly abandoned those liberties that made this country great?”

The audience erupted in applause. By bringing it back to the Magna Carta, England’s first ever bill of rights, I had connected with them. I now had their full attention and loud support, so I pushed on.

No matter how odious and nasty Abu Qatada may be, the whole point of human rights is that it is the nasty and odious people who need human rights the most, and need the protection of the law the most, because if we don’t extend it to them, there’s no point [in having them].

This is how you make an argument in front of a skeptical audience. You have to be able to adapt, you have to be agile, and to do that, you have to know your audience and cater to it.

I was able to win over most of that audience in Crewkerne, seemingly against the odds, not because those locals liked me or agreed with my politics but because I understood who they were, where they were coming from, and what they wanted, what they *needed*, to hear in order to be persuaded.

It isn’t always easy to do that—but it isn’t rocket science either.

★ ★ ★

In this chapter, I am going to outline three main ways in which you can win over a live audience—whether it’s your family in your living room, or a crowd of hundreds in a lecture hall, or even millions of people watching you at home on television.

Remember: anytime an audience is present, you cannot, *cannot*, afford to ignore them or take them for granted. The audience is the key. Even if you’re in a one-on-one

debate, *they* are the people who have been described as “judge and jury.” They are who you’re trying to convince, persuade, and bring on board with your arguments.

So how do you do all of that? How do you win them over?

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Above all, you have to try to understand where your audience is coming from. If, say, you’re in a competitive debate, you’ll want to get inside the head of the judge or the audience members whose votes you’re seeking. This means that to succeed in “knowing your audience,” you’ll have to do some legwork before you even enter the room, before you start speaking in front of a crowd.

First, find out who is going to be in the audience. These are the kind of questions I ask the organizers of every event that I’m invited to speak at:

- *How big is the audience?*
- *What kind of people constitute the audience?*
- *What’s the rough demographic? Are they young or old? Students or professionals? Political or apolitical? Male or female? White, Black, or Brown?*

It all matters, because once you have a detailed breakdown of the members of your prospective audience, you can focus your language and tailor your arguments toward them.

For example, if I’m speaking to a group of high school or college students, I probably shouldn’t make references to events from my childhood, which occurred before most of them were born. And I should definitely avoid patronizing or talking down to them. On the other hand, if I’m speaking to a group of adults, or older people, on a serious matter, I should avoid making references to movies or memes that might go over their heads.

The key benefit of knowing your audience is that it grants you the ability to modify the *language* you use to make your case.

Whether you’re trying to sell an argument or, for that matter, sell a product, you should also change *how* you present your speech, depending on who is in front of you. You cannot, writes business speaker Ian Altman, just take a “one-size-fits-all” approach. You have to be agile and be able to target different arguments to different audiences.

Everything from varying tone and volume, to varying content and emphasis, matters. Think about it this way: you wouldn’t pitch your ideas to your spouse the same way you would present them to a corporate executive. You would adjust your

tone—strong or soft, serious or conversational, more passionate or less. Just as important is your *volume*, depending on whether you’re addressing five people in a small conference room, five hundred people in a university auditorium, or five million people watching you at home on television.

Making these adjustments is necessary, even when you are trying to make the same argument in front of each of those very different audiences. And these strategies speak to the hardest part of public speaking: adapting. Whenever you take the spotlight—proverbially or literally—you need to be flexible. Be willing to customize your presentation—even the shape of your arguments—to whoever it is you want to win over.

You probably know how to convince your kids or your partner to do something, right? It’s because you know those people better than anyone else. If you learn as much as you can about the audience members who you are trying to address, persuade, and convince, you’ll find that it’s much easier to make headway.

To be clear: I don’t want you to *change* your entire argument, or just tell people what they want to hear. What I’m saying is that you should present your argument in such a way that people feel comfortable getting on board with that argument, because you’ve specifically tailored it to their interests or identities. It would be a huge mistake, as Ian Altman notes, to give the same speech to different types of people in different types of venues.

Take the issue of immigration. I’m not suggesting you should be pro-immigration in front of a liberal crowd and anti-immigration in front of a conservative one. I’m saying that if you’re addressing a right-wing or conservative crowd on the merits of immigration, if you’re trying to make a pro-immigration case to them, it might not make sense to quote, say, Barack Obama or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Instead, try quoting a prominent conservative, like Ronald Reagan, from his famous pro-immigration speech at Liberty State Park in New Jersey in 1980.

You could say: “Don’t take my word for it: Remember how Ronald Reagan in front of the Statue of Liberty praised immigrants for bringing ‘with them courage, ambition and the values of family, neighborhood, work, peace and freedom’ and helping ‘make America great again’?”

By changing your approach, and finding a common language, you immediately make the issue much more palatable.

So remember: cite facts, figures, and quotes that not only bolster your own argument but also appeal to the specific audience in front of you. This works beyond politics, as well—beyond Republican versus Democrat, or Tory versus Labour. If you are debating faith or religion with a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim, you might want to quote the Bible or the Quran to them. However, if you are debating an atheist, there really is no point quoting a holy book, is there?

In the summer of 2014, I was invited to give a speech to the World Affairs Council of Greater Houston, in Texas, on the topic of Muslim integration in Europe and the United States. I did my homework beforehand and learned that I would be addressing an audience not just of liberals but conservatives, too: people more skeptical of my message. So I made sure I peppered my talk with references to right-wing journalists and news sources—boosting my case for why it was a myth to suggest that Muslims are unable to integrate in the West.

“Don’t take my word for it,” I said (always a useful phrase in front of a skeptical audience). “Just two weeks ago, in the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, the leading right-wing, conservative British journalist and columnist, Fraser Nelson, editor of the right-wing *Spectator* magazine, published a piece headlined ‘The British Muslim Is Truly One among Us—and Proud to Be So.’ Nelson wrote, and I quote: ‘The integration of Muslims can now be seen as one of the great success stories of modern Britain.’”

Their ears pricked up when they heard the word *conservative* and the references to publications like the *Telegraph* and the *Spectator*. They didn’t expect it, and I had their undivided attention.

I was also told ahead of the event that there would be a fair number of Jewish audience members, too, so I decided to tell this (true) story from the UK.

Look at what happened last year when the tiny Jewish community in the northern city of Bradford was facing the closure of their historic synagogue, first built in 1880. Its roof was leaking, and the few dozen remaining regulars could not afford the repairs. The chairman of the synagogue, Rudi Leavor, made the decision to sell the building; it was on the verge of being purchased and turned into a block of luxury apartments when, out of nowhere, the synagogue was saved after a fundraising campaign led by a local mosque. Zulfi Karim, the secretary of Bradford’s Council of Mosques, who was behind the campaign, now refers to Leavor, who fled to the UK from Nazi-occupied Europe during the Second World War, as his “newfound brother.”

From behind my podium, I could see their eyes widen, unexpected smiles appearing on their faces. They were nudging and nodding to each other in approval.

Getting to know your audience is of absolute importance, but it is only the first step. It’s what you have to do before you even get up onstage, or on camera, or at the podium. The next step is about what you do once you’re up there.

GRAB THEIR ATTENTION

I have some bad news for you. You may have heard that viral stat about how a goldfish only has an attention span of nine seconds. But, according to a study conducted by

researchers at Microsoft, the average human loses “concentration after eight seconds.” You have very, *very* little time to capture an audience’s attention before they tune you out and start thinking about what they’re going to have for dinner or, more likely, scrolling through Instagram.

We live in an online era, where everyone, everywhere, is on their smartphone almost all the time. You’ll be speaking for twenty, thirty, forty minutes, yes, but if the people you’re addressing get distracted or—worse—*bored* at the very start, the rest of your presentation will end up being a huge waste of time. For you, and for them.

Whether giving a presentation in a boardroom or constructing an argument with friends, you want to start in a very clear, direct, and unique manner. As a group of comms experts point out, you want to avoid rote remarks, empty platitudes, and tired clichés.

- “Thank you for inviting me.”
- “I’m so glad to be here with you today.”
- “How are you all doing?”

No. No. *No*.

You must grab your audience in the very first minute, ideally in the very first ten or twenty seconds.

How?

1. Start with a strong opening line

Something unexpected, provocative, contrary even. To quote the legendary Dale Carnegie, “Begin with something interesting in your first sentence. Not the second. Not the third. The First! F-I-R-S-T! First!”

Here’s how British celebrity chef and food campaigner Jamie Oliver kicked off his 2010 TED Talk.

Sadly, in the next eighteen minutes when I do our chat, four Americans that are alive will be dead from the food that they eat. My name’s Jamie Oliver. I’m thirty-four years old. I’m from Essex in England, and for the last seven years I’ve worked fairly tirelessly to save lives in my own way. I’m not a doctor; I’m a chef, I don’t have expensive equipment or medicine. I use information, education.

Wouldn’t you want to sit up and listen to more of that?

2. Start with a question

Ideally, a “provocative” question, say those comms experts. “Starting with a question creates a knowledge gap: *a gap between what the listeners know and what they don’t know*,” adds Akash Karia in his book *How to Deliver a Great TED Talk*. “This gap creates curiosity because people are hardwired with a desire to fill knowledge gaps.”

Former NASA scientist James Hansen knows he’s not the greatest of orators, but he managed to use that very quality to grab his audience’s attention in a 2012 TED Talk on climate change. How? With these opening questions:

What do I know that would cause me, a reticent midwestern scientist, to get myself arrested in front of the White House protesting? And what would you do if you knew what I know?

Wouldn’t you want to hear the answers to those stark questions? Wouldn’t you look up from your iPhone for those?

3. Start with a story

Ideally, a personal anecdote. You get bonus points if it’s funny, able to get people laughing and relaxed—and paying attention—from the get-go. Storytelling helps with instant engagement because everyone loves a great yarn. Plus, our brains are built to fall in love with a good story—one that taps into imagination and empathy from the very beginning.

Entrepreneur Ric Elias accomplished this in his 2011 TED Talk with a very personal recollection of a terrifying flight.

Imagine a big explosion as you climb through three thousand feet. Imagine a plane full of smoke. Imagine an engine going clack, clack, clack, clack, clack, clack, clack. It sounds scary. Well, I had a unique seat that day. I was sitting in 1D.

Aren’t you instantly transfixed and transported to a plane in the sky?

Pay close attention to your first sentence if you want anyone else to pay attention to what you have to say. Surprise your audience with a striking one-liner, an irresistible question, or a visceral story. You’ll see people’s eyes turn to you, instead of to their phones—and then the room is yours.

But, of course, getting people’s attention is one thing. Keeping people’s attention is another. How do we do that?

CONNECT WITH THEM

Remember, the goal is to get your audience on your side, especially in a debate. The point is to change not your opponent's mind but the minds of those watching and listening in the audience. This is especially true if you are participating in a competitive debate in which the audience will decide the outcome—but it applies to any forum, be it a TV talk show or a Thanksgiving dinner table.

To keep an audience's attention and to keep them on your side, the name of the game is to *connect*. You want to appeal to them with arguments that tap into their beliefs, and that, as we've seen, are built upon a clear knowledge of your audience. But even once you've done your homework—perfected your facts, found your sources, prepared your counterarguments—there are important strategies to employ in real time.

1. Make eye contact

You have to try and look people in the eye when you speak to them. And also try and make eye contact with people across the whole room. Don't leave some parts of the audience feeling left out.

As speech coach Fia Fasbinder has pointed out, eye contact “makes the audience feel heard and involves them in your presentation.” It is, Fasbinder says, “the nonverbal equivalent of saying somebody's name aloud.”

Try your hardest to avoid the “death by presentation” phenomenon. That means: do *not* read from your notes, or from PowerPoint slides. Remember: your audience could read your notes or your slides themselves if they wanted to. You could circulate hard copies of your main points and go home and take a nap! The audience came to see you—and, to quote speech coach Craig Valentine, they want to be “seen by you.” So, keep your eyes on them as much as possible.

But—and I must stress this point!—when you are looking at them, please do not imagine them naked. Many people—wrongly citing Winston Churchill—say it's a good way to confidently address a big audience while also dealing with your nerves. They say it's a way of empowering a speaker and tackling a sense of “vulnerability” onstage, writes Fasbinder. They're wrong.

I've never met anyone who says it actually works for them. Also, I tend to have friends and family in the audience—and you probably will, too. My parents have often sat in the front row. Why would I want to picture any of *them* naked? How is that supposed to help me stay focused on delivering my speech?

Instead, you want to make sure you've prepared enough beforehand that you can avoid reading your slides, so you can feel comfortable enough to look out at your audience without going into panic mode. You want to reach the point where you can meet their eyes like you would in any one-on-one conversation. And, as in most conversations, you're headed in the wrong direction if Plan A is to picture them naked.

2. Heap praise

What do you tend to do when you want to charm a person or win them over? You heap praise on them. You're nice toward them. You make them feel special.

The same applies to an audience. Praise can be one of the simplest and most powerful tools to engage an audience—or any group of people!

I cannot tell you the number of U.S. cities where I have been invited to speak or debate, and where I opened my remarks by suggesting that *this* particular city was my favorite city in America.

In Detroit, Michigan, on a visit from the UK almost a decade ago, I told the crowd that everything I knew about the great Motor City came from Detective Axel Foley. They erupted in laughter and cheers. *This British guy with the funny accent knows Beverly Hills Cop and also knows the Detroit reference?* they thought to themselves as they settled in to listen to me speak on some obscure political issue.

When I visited Canada in 2017 and 2018, I told the liberal Torontonians who attended my events how lucky they were to live in a country with legalized marijuana, tolerance toward Syrian refugees, and Justin Trudeau—whereas I had just landed from ... Trump's America. There was an instant connection.

Of course, part of the audience will know what you're doing, but that's more than okay if you do it well. Your point is to tailor your praise so that it reflects actual familiarity with the place or with the audience—and how they see themselves.

3. Get personal

There is simply no better way to influence or stir an audience—instantly, powerfully, authentically—than by opening up to them with a personal story or anecdote.

To be clear: I'm not saying you need to tell them long stories about your family vacations or show them baby pictures from the stage. I'm saying that you can share a key biographical detail, or an emotion that you're feeling in the moment, or a self-deprecating joke. It is a tried-and-tested way of bonding with an audience of strangers—and of laying the groundwork for you to then *persuade* them.

The harsh reality is that people won't bond with your arguments in a vacuum, but they *will*, says speech coach Bas van den Beld, “bond with you”—the person making those arguments. By sharing a revealing story or a personal flaw, you allow audience members a way to identify with you. You show how *you* are no different to *them*.

Here I am speaking at the Oxford Union in 2013, in a debate-winning speech that subsequently went viral and—at the time of writing—is approaching ten million views on YouTube. The motion was “The House believes Islam is a religion of peace,” and this is how I chose to make it personal with the audience of students crowded inside a packed chamber. As I approached my concluding remarks, I told them:

Let me just say this to you: think about what the opposite of this motion is. If you vote “no” tonight, think about what you’re saying the opposite of this motion is. That Islam isn’t a religion of peace; it is a religion of war, of violence, of terror, of aggression. That the people who follow Islam—me, my wife, my retired parents, my six-year-old child, that 1.8 million of your fellow British residents and citizens, that 1.6 billion people across the world, your fellow human beings—are all followers, promoters, believers in a religion of violence. Do you really think that? Do you really believe that to be the case?

The personal touch is snuck in there—as I discuss myself, my family, my child—but it pulls them into their own personal decision, in real time. At this point, they have already listened to me speak for ten minutes, and (spoiler alert) there was no violence or aggression or terror on that stage. I was making them apply the motion not just to some vague Other but also to *me* and to the millions of other Muslims they shared a country with.

Of course, you can use a personal touch for lighter purposes. When I appeared on NBC’s *Late Night with Seth Meyers* comedy show in 2018, I invoked my other daughter to make an important point about the presidency—and to get a laugh while connecting with an audience that did not know me.

ME: Trump makes George Bush look good. Trump makes everyone look good! I don’t think we should lower the bar so much that we say ... “Oh, Trump went to a funeral and didn’t tweet or insult anyone or drool, therefore he’s acting presidential.” If that’s the criteria, I have a six-year-old daughter at home and she’s ready for the Oval Office.

SETH MEYERS (laughing): Well, we would love to meet her. She sounds fantastic.

To connect to your audience, you want them to relate to you. *You*. Not just your arguments.

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So there you have it. Get to know your audience; grab their attention from the outset; and connect with them throughout. These are the three simple steps to winning them over.

For that matter, you really do want to win them over if you want to win your argument. It is difficult to overstate the power and impact of having an audience on

your side, knowing they agree with you, seeing them nodding along to your statements. It gives you an edge over your opponent.

In my view, the audience is the equivalent of what military strategists like to call a “force multiplier”—it is an added element that boosts the effect of the power you can deploy, while at the same time also curbing your opponent’s.

Too often, we put all our time and energy into defeating our opponent in an argument. But in doing so we ignore the audience—when the members of the audience are the true judge of who has won and who has lost. Just as often, says author Jay Heinrichs, we put all our energy into crafting a speech that sounds appealing to us—rather than one that will sound appealing to a group of strangers.

How important is the audience? Let me conclude with this quote from movie director Billy Wilder. “An audience is never wrong,” he remarked. “An individual member of it may be an imbecile, but a thousand imbeciles together in the dark—that is critical genius.”