



KING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

TRAININGS THAT INSPIRE. STRATEGIES THAT STICK.

START STRONG OR LOSE THE ROOM

*5BRAIN-BOOSTING OPENINGS THAT
CAPTURE ATTENTION INSTANTLY*

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You only get one chance to make a first impression.

Within the first minute of a presentation, your audience's brain is quietly deciding three things:

Is this relevant to me?

Is this interesting enough to keep listening?

Is this person worth paying attention to?

The beginning of a presentation matters more than most presenters realize. When the opening activates curiosity, emotion, and relevance, the brain leans in. When it doesn't, attention drifts before the first slide even matters.

Below are five simple ways to open a presentation so people stay engaged from the very start.

1. START WITH A STORY

Emotion is the brain's fastest attention hook.

One of my favorite ways to begin a workshop is with honesty. I sometimes open by saying:

"Hi everyone. My name is Shauna... and I'm a yelling teacher in recovery."

That line usually gets a laugh, but it's also true. When I taught middle school, I cared deeply about my students. But when behavior escalated, I sometimes found myself raising my voice more than I wanted to. I saw the same thing happen at home with my own children. I would get frustrated and lose emotional control in ways that didn't reflect the kind of adult I wanted to be.

That experience pushed me to study behavior, brain science, and classroom management more deeply. What I learned changed the way I worked with students and adults.

Stories like this work because they are **real, relatable, and human**. The brain naturally pays attention when it senses authenticity. Neuroscience research shows that compelling narratives trigger "neural coupling," where the listener's brain activity synchronizes with the storyteller's, enhancing both attention and memory.

[1] Hasson, U., et al. (2012). Brain-to-brain coupling: a mechanism for creating and sharing a social world. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 16(2), 114–121.

2. LEAD WITH A BIG IDEA

Clarity signals that something important is coming.

Sometimes the strongest opening is a bold idea. For example:

"If we want better outcomes for students, we have to look first at the conditions adults create for learning."

Or:

"Most classroom management strategies fail for one simple reason — they focus on controlling behavior instead of understanding it."

A clear idea helps the audience quickly understand **why the conversation matters**. Adult learning theory — particularly Malcolm Knowles' principles of andragogy — emphasizes that adults are most motivated to learn when they immediately see the practical relevance and value of the information to their own lives and challenges.

[2] Knowles, M. S., Holton III, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2014). *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*. Routledge.

3. SPARK CURIOSITY

Questions activate the brain's problem-solving instinct.

Curiosity turns passive listeners into active thinkers. Try opening with a question like:

- *Why do some classrooms feel calm and focused while others feel chaotic — even with similar students?*
- *Why do adults sometimes reinforce the very behaviors they want to stop?*
- *What if the biggest classroom management strategy isn't a strategy at all?*

When curiosity is triggered, the brain automatically wants to **resolve the question**. According to the "information gap theory" of curiosity, recognizing a gap in our knowledge activates the brain's reward system, releasing dopamine and preparing the hippocampus for enhanced learning and memory retention.

[3] Gruber, M. J., Gelman, B. D., & Ranganath, C. (2014). *States of curiosity modulate hippocampus-dependent learning via the dopaminergic circuit*. *Neuron*, 84(2), 486–496.

4. LEAN INTO WHAT YOU'RE KNOWN FOR

Authenticity builds credibility.

Sometimes the best opening comes directly from your work. Many educators know me for the idea that **what we say matters** when working with children.

That belief shaped my workshops, my writing, and even my TEDx talk about the power of adult language. Sometimes I begin by saying:

"Before we talk about strategies, we have to talk about something even more powerful... the words adults use every day."

Watch my TEDx talk here: <https://youtu.be/lwQDFLkDQBA> When your opening reflects what you genuinely care about, people feel the authenticity immediately.

Research in persuasive communication consistently demonstrates that a speaker's perceived authenticity and source credibility are primary drivers of audience trust and engagement.

[4] Kumkale, G. T., & Albarracín, D. (2004). *The sleeper effect in persuasion: a meta-analytic review*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130(1), 143–172.

5. USE POWER LANGUAGE

Energy is contagious.

Compare these two openings: **Weak:** *"Today I'm going to share a few strategies that might help with engagement."* **Stronger:** *"Today I'm going to show you a few simple shifts that can dramatically increase student engagement and reduce behavior disruptions."*

One sounds optional. The other sounds valuable. The words you choose signal **confidence, relevance, and purpose**. Linguistic research shows that the strategic framing of messages and the use of powerful, confident language significantly influence how an audience processes information, directing their attention and shaping their perception of the speaker's authority.

[5] Areni, C. S., & Sparks, J. R. (2005). *Language power and persuasion. Psychology & Marketing, 22(6), 507–525.*

Why This Works for the Brain

The brain quickly decides whether something deserves attention. Three elements increase engagement immediately:

EMOTION	Stories activate emotional centers in the brain, which strengthens attention and memory.
PREDICTION	Questions spark curiosity, causing the brain to anticipate the answer.
RELEVANCE	When the opening connects to a real challenge or benefit, the brain labels the information as important.

Emotion + Curiosity + Relevance = Attention
And attention is the gateway to learning.

Your Turn: Draft Your Opening

Presentation Topic:

Which strategy will you try?

- ☐ Story
 ☐ Big Idea
 ☐ Curiosity Question
- ☐ Personal Expertise
 ☐ Power Language

Draft your opening:

How could you make it more engaging?

Here's the bottom line: The brain remembers contrast. "Start Strong or Lose the Room" works because it creates a tiny moment of tension. That tension pulls attention forward — and attention is where learning begins.

Ready to Strengthen Your Voice?

Look back at the opening you just drafted. Notice what shifts when you become intentional about your first 60 seconds. When presenters lead with clarity and confidence, something changes in the room — people lean in, ideas land, conversations move.

Communication isn't just a presentation skill. It's a leadership skill.

If you're ready to speak with more confidence, organize your thoughts quickly, and deliver messages that truly connect, your next step is here.

Speak for Impact: Educator's Edition is a short, practical course that takes educators and leaders from nervous and scattered to clear, confident, and compelling.

You'll learn how to:

- ✓ Open strong and capture attention immediately
- ✓ Structure ideas quickly and clearly
- ✓ Make your message stick
- ✓ Show up with confidence to meetings, PD sessions, and conferences

You already have powerful ideas. This course helps you deliver them in a way people remember.

References

[1] Hasson, U., Ghazanfar, A. A., Galantucci, B., Garrod, S., & Keysers, C. (2012). Brain-to-brain coupling: a mechanism for creating and sharing a social world. ***Trends in Cognitive Sciences***, 16(2), 114–121.

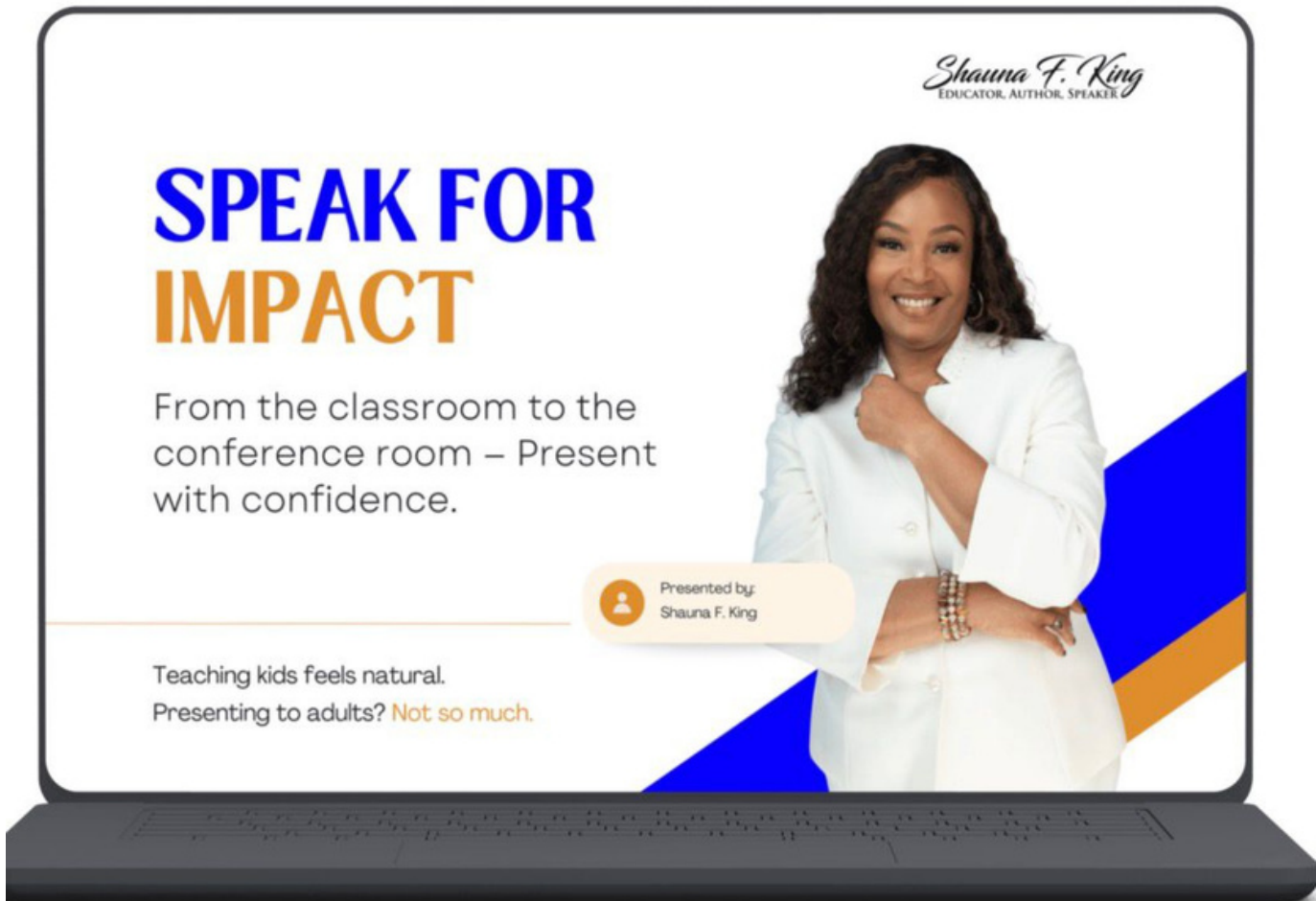
[2] Knowles, M. S., Holton III, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2014). ***The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*** (8th ed.). Routledge.

[3] Gruber, M. J., Gelman, B. D., & Ranganath, C. (2014). States of curiosity modulate hippocampus-dependent learning via the dopaminergic circuit. ***Neuron***, 84(2), 486–496.

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[5] Areni, C. S., & Sparks, J. R. (2005). Language power and persuasion. ***Psychology & Marketing***, 22(6), 507–525.

<https://shaunafking.thinkific.com/pages/speak-for-impact>



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