Harold Thimbleby is an ACM Distinguished Speaker (see http://dsp.acm.org)
He has given over 400 invited talks in 30 countries
1 What do pirates say? . . . Arrr

I’ve sat through many talks and panels, and I’ve been wondering about how to avoid the basic mistakes. Pirate talks are the solution!

So, why do pirates say “Arrr”? 

Pirate Talks, with their mnemonic Arrr, which I’ll explain below, are a way to remember how to give great talks or how to participate in panels and other forms of presentations. Pirate Talks also suggest ways to help chair sessions and panels — in any role, you can encourage others to use the Pirate Talk method.

Arrr stands for Audience, Remember, Route, Reflection.

Arrr covers the essentials:

- **Delivery**: Who is your audience, what do you want them to remember, and what route will you use?
- **Improvement**: What reaction did you get, what did you reflect, and what will you revise?

Read on!

2 Spelling it out

2.1 Arrr — Audience

Do you know your audience? What assumptions do they have, what do they already know and understand (or think they understand)? How will you find out? If it is a mixed audience, what sorts of people are represented in your audience? What do you want to say? That may not help your audience! What does your audience want to hear? That may not help your audience. You have to align (another A for Arrr!) what they want with what you want to get them to remember.

Panels are often a series of short, closely related talks. Often the speakers are so keen to say things, the time slot overruns. The Pirate Panel would start by the chair asking everyone in the audience if they have any questions. Get a few questions going. Soon people in the audience start disagreeing with each other. Now is the time to start the panel, as there is energy and engagement — and the panel presenters now know the audience.

At conferences, pirates often sit in on earlier talks to reconnoitre the audience (and the AV system). They also scrutinise other speakers to see what things work best with the audience — and what don’t.

2.2 Arrr — Remember

Sometimes called “take homes” or (more formally) “learning outcomes” — what do you want the audience to remember?

Maybe you want them to remember you are cool, you need contacts, you’ve got solutions to their problems, or maybe you want them to learn a specific solution or skill during the talk or session you are running. The short point is that if you don’t know what your audience is
supposed to remember, they won’t remember it. They will remember something like one of your diverting stories instead, or a joke.

(Sometimes your organisation or its media department just wants the audience to remember their corporate image, logo and slide format. Pirates resist, unless it helps the presentation.)

What is your hook that will help your audience remember? It can be fun to keep referring to your hook in creative ways to rub it in. Brief, personal stories make for good hooks. Remember, the best pirates have hooks — and the best piratical hooks have one point that draws the audience in.

- Move the hook to the front.
- Show don’t tell.

In a nutshell, if you haven’t worked out the take home, your audience certainly won’t!

Remember that often what you want to say is way more than what the audience needs to remember; it is very tempting to fill talks with things you “need” to say — but think very carefully, piratically, whether all this helps. Pause, slow down, let empty space give the audience time to think. If you have bullet points, go through all your slides and delete a bullet point off each one. Anyway, you should be using cannon balls not bullets — by the time a pirate is shooting bullets, the advantage is lost!

2.3 Arrr — Route

Now you know your audience and what you want them to remember, plan the route from A to B. You will probably use a program like PowerPoint or Keynote, or something like Word if you are just working on a script to read; these tools readily allow you to develop and rearrange your talk. Do this continually, thinking about the route from A to B and what is relevant to it and what is a diversion, which probably you should delete.

The first few seconds are really important, both for you and for your audience. If you want your audience to be passive, now is the moment to train them you are not interested in them (tell them what they already know, like the title of your talk and how wonderful you are); or if you want them to be active, now is the moment to be interested in them:

“I am really pleased to be with such wonderful people today. Can I start by asking you all a couple of questions...”
If you want any interaction in your presentation, *start off* interactive.

(If you ask a difficult or poor question, everybody will hope somebody else will answer it. Instead, think of things to do: for instance, ask for a vote, say a show of hands, or ask people to think and write down their answers: then even if only one person speaks out the answer, everybody has at least had a chance to think. Try not to ask questions you know the answer to as the audience will feel set up.)

A very simple route that often works well is to start with a scenario, a story or problem (perhaps out of your own life so you and the audience naturally identify with it) that is unresolved or creates tension; then at the end of the pirate talk, to return to the same story and resolve it using what you want your audience to remember.

### 2.4 Arrr — Reflection

Reflection means three things:

- asking for a reaction to get feedback,
- reflecting on it,
- and then improving what you do.

#### 2.4.1 Ask for a reaction

Do you know how successful you were in getting the audience down your route to what you wanted them to remember? Often talks and panels include questions from the audience. Why don’t you also ask the audience some questions? What’s the most useful thing I said for you? How could I improve the pictures/text to be more readable? Don’t leave before you get some feedback, at least don’t always leave without feedback — without reflective feedback, you will not be able to improve. Did the audience really go from A to B? How can you give a better talk next time?

Audiences are very bad at giving useful feedback unless you give them specific questions to help you.

Poor speakers often disappear immediately after their talks, so they never find out. They never hear the questions and new ideas from the audience that pirates bask in.

#### 2.4.2 Reflect on it

If you do not reflect about your Pirate Talk, you can’t get better. Where did it go well, where could it be improved? How do other people talk, and what can you learn from them?

#### 2.4.3 Revise to improve

Finally, right after your talk, revise it so that next time you look at it or need it for the next presentation it is better! You can remember all the slides that confused you; fix them. You can remember the spelling mistakes; fix them. You can remember the better slide order you could have used — well, fix it! (Somebody might ask you for a PDF, so fix the errors before you give it away.) If you don’t revise your talk or presentation, what use was it to reflect?
Many people do a lot of preparation for their presentations (even over several years on their research project) and they fall into the trap of thinking their presentation is the end of their work: finally they get to talk about what they have been doing!

No! The presentation is when you finally understand what you have been doing, what people are interested in, and how you can go on to develop even better ideas. Your presentation and the thought you put into organising it and filtering it down to the powerful hooks is the foundation for building bigger things. Why should it be the end, when you are asking the audience to start from where you got to? If you have convinced your audience of something worthwhile to think or do, why not be convinced yourself?

3 On becoming a pirate

It is hard to imagine a timid pirate! Yet many people find speaking in front of an audience nerve-wracking, and those of us who don’t still find it nerve wracking and all too often behave as if we fear for our lives.

We speak too fast or we ramble, we have a slide nobody can read, we think the audience is criticising us. Somebody asks a question we can’t answer, we run out of time, or we haven’t got enough to say. We say something nobody in the audience understands. We might get emotional and the AV will won’t work. Why are we here even? Worst of all, we criticise ourselves.

Pirate talks start with the audience.

The audience are on your side. That sea of blank faces — that’s what audiences look like. Look at the audience and appreciate them. They appreciate you. They are eager for you to talk to them. Look at them, as individuals, and talk to them.

Start your talk by thanking them: this is a great place, you are great people, thanks for coming to my talk.

Eye contact is good, but blank faces are normal; appreciate support, but don’t look for it: just assume people are supporting you (at least until proven otherwise . . . when it might be time to get your cutlass out).

The audience are not and never will be telepathic. They have no idea what is going on inside your head, and in particular they cannot hear your critical voice. In fact, you are doing fine.

But it is scary, and practice helps.

If you have an important talk to give — and all talks are important for the people who are listening — practise it first. Not only practise what you are saying, but practise how you want to work with your audience, how you want to breathe. Don’t just practise your talk, but try pausing, try walking around, try unplugging the projector and just saying what you want to say. Have experienced, critically supportive speakers in your audience.

If you want to sound like you are talking to yourself and ignoring the audience, go right ahead and practise in front of a mirror or in the shower. No; please practise with a critically supportive audience (organise two or three people at least), and even better in the same sort of space you will have to give your talk.

Better still, go on a course and take talking seriously; it will change your life — and it will change the lives of the people in your audience, because that is why you give talks.
Too many people think preparation means preparing exactly what you want to say. No. Preparation means becoming comfortable so you can be authentic — which may mean feeling uncomfortable, but being happy with it.

The best way to become like a pirate is to just behave like one. You have said Arrr. You have thought about your audience, what you want them to remember (not too much!), how you want them to get there. Afterwards you will reflect and count your wounds: have you still got all your arms, legs and eyes? Next time, maybe you’ll have a wooden leg, eye patch and a hook for your hand, but you’ll be a real pirate at last.

If you decide to go on a course, I very highly recommend John Dawson’s; see details at http://www.speaking-infront.co.uk

4 How to design talks and slides

Many people give detailed advice on how to design slides, how to use PowerPoint, Prezi, Keynote, or PDF, how to style slides and transitions. It’s quite complex stuff, and some of the advice is very detailed. If you work for some organisations, they will have a “corporate style” complete with logos and rules, perhaps even a Power Point template you must use.

All this advice is misleading.

It makes you focus on the wrong things.

If you are not careful you will end up talking to PowerPoint (“I need to say this as well . . .”) rather than to your audience. The audience wants the pirate, not the animated bullet points. It does not want or need the logo in the right place on each slide; it wants to engage with you.

Go to other people’s talks, decide what slides work (if any!), which you like and why. Start by copying those. Notice which slides presenters put up and apologise for — “sorry you can’t read this” — and don’t copy those!

Certainly learn how to use PowerPoint, Keynote or whatever so that when you prepare a talk you are not thinking about PowerPoint. Every time you think about PowerPoint (how does it work? What design shall I use?) you are not thinking about your message.

Think about your Arrr.

When you give a talk, once you’ve got the stuff working — forget PowerPoint. Talk to your audience. It’s harsh to say it, but if a pirate was still struggling with firing their canons in the right direction when they were attacking, it’s a bit late to find out. Play with PowerPoint until whatever you want to do with it is second nature.

Here are four rules:

1. If you have to give a talk sometime that might need PowerPoint (or Keynote, etc), start using it now, and start plugging it in to projectors so you find out how multiple screens work, how remote controls work, and so on. It is a complex beast, and you really need to get to grips with it. (Light Table and Slide Sorter View should be your friends — that’s
the main technical advice I'll give you.) Sure, start by putting together a draft talk — then get out, get well away from PowerPoint, and think about your message and your audience. You are not presenting to PowerPoint but to a sea of people.

2. If you are using a laptop for a presentation, switch off everything on it — like wireless and other applications — as you do not want any surprises like a virus update or a text message intruding in the middle of your talk. If you are using a PC, try and make sure it too is disconnected from the internet.

3. I always resist when I am asked for a PowerPoint or USB of my talk beforehand. I want to play with my talk as I watch and learn from other speakers, and from what the audience enjoys. If I hand over control of my talk too soon, I can't make changes, and I can't play with it to rehearse it (as I rehearse I change my mind about the structure, etc), so the rehearsal is an important learning experience for me. Also, if I give them PowerPoint, are they using the same version of PowerPoint I am — and will I be familiar with their version when I give the talk? I want to use my own laptop and with software I understand. For example, the keystroke that makes the screen go blue is useful — it helps you pause, helps the audience listen to you — but you need to know it works, and the most reliable way to make sure it works is to use your own laptop with your own software you are used to.

4. If asked to talk at a conference, I always ask if I can give a talk immediately before lunch, and not give the first one of the day! That way, I get to understand the dynamics of the audience, the AV and the rest of it. Also, since nobody is scheduled to follow me, I can be more relaxed about timing. Pirates don't get worked up over timing.

Perhaps don't use PowerPoint; if it (or any bit of the IT or AV) gets in your way, it will certainly not help you or your audience. Do check it works before standing in front of an audience — if nothing else, the adrenaline of the performance will make fixing problems even harder and even more embarrassing! Pirates win by surprise. The audience is on your side, and they will love somebody who is authentic and not trapped into any of the horrors of bad PowerPoint presentations.

Then forget all the rules, and just do a great talk for your audience.

Giving a great talk is about communicating. Seven Pinker's The Sense of Style is an excellent book on writing well, but also on communicating well and understanding the ways we fail to communicate well. For example, the curse of knowledge is that we know so much about what we are saying, we think it is easier to understand than it is — and we create convoluted sentences and story lines we find easy that our audience cannot grasp because they do not have the knowledge we have, ironically the very knowledge we are trying to communicate. In Pinker's own words:

How do you write?

The answer is "for an audience." But not to impress them.
The Classic style helps them discern something you know they’d be able to see, if only they were looking in the right place. Happily, this also makes writing easier. We never feel any difficulty when we are pointing out something to somebody next to us.
Understood this way, writing isn’t a performance, a confrontation or a matter of ramming information into someone else’s brain.
It’s the writer and reader, side by side, scanning the landscape. The reader wants to see; your job is to do the pointing.

5 Top ten bad habits of landlubbers

1. Landlubbers have not thought through what added value and drama actually delivering their presentation in person can achieve for their audience. The audience could have stayed at home and watched something on TV. Landlubbers present in a way that looks like they don’t need to be there and YouTube would have been just as good if not better. Why are you standing in front of the audience giving a presentation? What does the talk have for the audience that is present right in front of you? Landlubbers talk as if the audience is not there. The audience turned up to see you and engage with you; why not ask them a question? (At least, why not get a show of hands? The audience will feel engaged, and you can get a sense of what they are interested in.)

2. Reading a script, and not even standing up to read it! How can landlubbers engage with their audience when they read a script? Audiences can read faster than you can talk, and they would probably have preferred to have been given the script to read in their own time. (Written speeches are very hard to script because the tone of writing is different from the tone of speech; written scripts are usually far too sophisticated and lose life when read aloud.)

3. Many talks fail—or aren’t as good as they could have been—because the landlubber spent their time “talking to PowerPoint” (spending a lot of time writing stuff that PowerPoint sucked out of them) and they lost sight of the fact that they should have been talking to the audience, and using PowerPoint as a tool, not as a word processor. The symptom is a lot of text, complex slides, lots of bullets. Sometimes it happens because the presenter is confused about the difference between audience notes (handouts) and a presentation. They are different, and one of PowerPoint’s beguiling features is that it can make handouts far too easily from bad presentations. If you really want your audience to remember key points, give them an abstract, a list of key points, or anything completely different from your slides; even a blank sheet of paper and a pen so they can make their own notes (see how to take notes cs.swan.ac.uk/~csharold/teaching/notes.html).

4. Landlubbers do not use emptiness, pauses or white space. They talk too fast, have cluttered slides, and do not look at people in the audience. A presentation is theatre, so use pauses for effect and emphasis, not as holes to fill in with your next point.

5. Landlubbers apologise. I’m sorry you can’t read this slide. I had to cut the bottom off the graph. This table is too small to read, but … You aren’t expected to understand this formula but … Clearly, landlubbers do not spend the effort beforehand thinking about the audience to avoid doing things they have to apologise for, nor did they practise and debug the talk before presenting it!
6. Landlubbers try to tell their audience everything (and often ramble while doing so), another symptom of having not worked out what their presentation is about for the audience in front of them. Landlubbers say too much. It is always better to give a short talk with the audience wishing for more, than a long talk and the audience wishing for less. Pirates, in contrast, think of their presentations as the start of a relationship with some people in the audience. They give those people a hunger to find out more from them!

7. Landlubbers panic and feel like they will get sea sick and would rather walk the plank! They should not worry: the audience is not telepathic, and has no idea what you haven’t said. Most of the audience will remember their first talks and they are on your side. If it truly is a panicky talk, don't apologise, instead ask for help, and get your audience on your side:

“This is the first time I have spoken to such an experienced and professional audience. Thank you so much for your support. I would love to have your feedback about how I can do even better next time — and there will be a next time!”

8. Landlubbers think of their presentations just as things to get over with, as the end of all their work. In contrast, pirates think of their presentations as ways to reflect on their thinking, to improve their ideas and to make progress, as ways to engage an audience on their project. Why do people talk to an audience if not to get them to take up and carry on with the ideas they remember? And if you want the audience to carry on, why not you too? Thus a pirate sets out to help their audience, and the work of speaking clearly improves the pirate’s own thoughts, and often, in fact, leads them to new insights that would not have happened without the pressure of preparing a wonderful — piratical — talk and getting feedback from the audience.

9. When landlubbers do give a nice talk, they don't write it up (or think of other ways of spreading it) so more people can benefit from it! (see cs.swan.ac.uk/csharold/teaching/Writing.pdf)

10. When landlubbers talk, there isn’t a hook; there is nothing specific (or too many things) for the audience to remember. There was nothing to draw them in, or too much of it was confusing — what did the speak want them to take away? The audience was not engaged, the presentation wasn’t aligned with their knowledge and experience, and probably the landlubber had no idea. Nothing hooked the audience because the landlubber didn’t carefully work out what their hook was. Of course, real pirates have no problems with hooks (and they prefer pistols to bullet points).

6 Don’t be a victim

Those of us at universities live in a culture of increasing uniformity and automation, as well as assessment of our “performance.” We have to provide lecture notes, we have to have a syllabus and learning outcomes. We have to have good feedback. We pour out material — probably reading it from the notes or bullet points on the slides — and hope the students absorb it. The
students ask if stuff is in the exams, and we cannot tell them because that would be cheating. I am not sure why students attend such lectures when books are easier to learn from; I am not sure why we provide notes when books (and many free online courses) are done to much higher standards — and also help students realise there are many sources of information they can use.

The model of pouring information into students' heads is called the Nurnberg Funnel, and it fits computerisation and even automatic assessment nicely. We end up being more worried about students cheating than being inspired.

But once we as lecturers focus on the negative things, things get worse. Worse, our students learn that this is how to lecture, and they in turn will impose the style on everyone they present to. They will also assess our lecturing based on these expectations we gave them. You, too, are a survivor of poor lecturing when you were a student.

It takes a huge effort to even recognise being a victim and then to rise up to overturn the culture: but that is what pirates do.

- **Why do you want to lecture rather than have your audience (e.g., undergraduate students) learn in other ways?** Explain your excitement and motivation for the topics to your audience.

- **What is your call to action?** Pirates need shipmates! You surely do not just want your audience to know stuff they can regurgitate in exams; you want them to do something with what they have learned. Even if it is obvious to you, most audiences do not know what the right action is, and if not, they will go away and do nothing. Spell out your call to action.

- **Handing out notes identical to your slides just passivates students.** Teach your students about *active* note-taking, such as Cornell Notes.

- **If you do not enthuse your students, next week you will have to tell them more facts, and thus perpetuate the Nurnberg Funnel.**

- **Keep Arrr in mind and be yourself.** Be true to your goals to excite, enthuse and transform your audience. If you need to rebel against the culture, that is what pirates do. Go and do it.

### 7 More details

Please see my web site www.harold.thimbleby.net, especially the bits on teaching at www.harold.thimbleby.net/teaching.html.

### 8 Finally . . .

- **Why are pirates called pirates?** Because they just Arrr.

- **How do pirates know that they are pirates?** They think, therefore they Arrr.
• To err is human. To Arrr is pirate.

• When the pirate’s audience gets the point, they will have an Arrr Arrr moment.

I would love to hear any comments or feedback on pirate talks or any other ideas about talking and presenting! Please email me at harold@thimbleby.net