

Thomas Jefferson, Steve Jobs, and the Rule of 3



Thomas Jefferson by Rembrandt Peale, 1800

This week America celebrates the three inalienable rights voiced in the U.S. Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Life, liberty, and happiness might very well be the three most important words in American history. The words are so eloquent, so impactful, they warrant their own [Wikipedia entry](#). According to Wikipedia the phrase is considered by some as the “the most well-crafted, influential sentences in the history of the English language.” Those three words inspired other countries, most notably France, to seek its own freedoms from oppression and to delineate the rights of its citizens into groups of three. The French motto “liberty, equality, and fraternity” traces its origin to the French revolution. The list of countries that were directly inspired by the U.S. Declaration of Independence is so large, I don’t think it’s a stretch to argue that those three words might very well be the most important three words in human history.

Why did Jefferson choose three rights instead of, say, twelve?

Jefferson was a skilled writer and his famous phrase reflects a rhetorical technique that can be traced to ancient Greece—a figure of speech using three words to express one idea. As a communications coach, I strongly recommend using the ‘Rule of 3’ in all areas of communications: marketing, pitches, and presentations.

The most persuasive number in communications. It is well established that we can only hold a small amount of information in short term, or ‘active,’ memory. In 1956, Bell Labs reached out to Harvard professor George Miller who published a classic paper titled, “The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two.” Miller argued that we have a hard time retaining more than seven to nine digits in short-term memory. Now you know why a phone number is 7 digits. Contemporary scientists, however, have put the number of items we can easily recall in short-term memory closer to three or four “chunks” of information. Think about it. When someone leaves a phone number on a voice message, you’re more likely to recall the first 3 digits before having to listen to the message again for the remainder of the number.

Since three is easier to remember than four, or seven, I suggest sticking to the Rule of 3 whenever possible. If your listener will only remember about three things from your conversation, presentation, or email, why overwhelm them with twenty-two key messages? Longer lists are complex, confusing, and convoluted.

The Rule of 3 is everywhere. The next time you are standing in the security line at a U.S airport, pay attention to the TSA instructions. The “3 simple steps to security” are: Show ID and boarding pass, take out liquids, and take off shoes and jackets. A former Air Force pilot approached me after a presentation on improving communication skills and said it reminded him of the “3 rules of surviving captivity”: fellowship with other prisoners, survive, and return with honor.



The TSA and military branches know that listing tasks in groups of three is more easily processed and, therefore, easier to follow. Great speeches are often divided into three themes, plays are often divided into three acts, and the same technique applies to persuasive presentations—tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them.

Steve Jobs’ love of threes. Two hundred years after Jefferson’s words sparked a revolution, two young men launched a computer revolution from the garage of a nondescript house in Northern California. In 1976 Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak created Apple Computer to build tools that would empower everyday people. Wozniak was the engineer; Jobs was the visionary and the marketing genius who understood the role communications would play in launching the revolution.

Steve Jobs applied the Rule of 3 in nearly every presentation and product launch. In 2007 Jobs introduced the first iPhone as the “third” of Apple’s revolutionary product categories (the first two were the Macintosh and the iPod). He even said that Apple would be introducing “three” revolutionary products—a new iPod, a phone, and an Internet communications device. Jobs repeated the three products slowly until the audience finally figured out he was talking about one device capable of handling all three tasks.

In 2010 Jobs introduced the first iPad with a slide showing the new tablet as a “third device” between a smartphone and a laptop. The iPad, he told the audience, would also come in “three models”: 16, 32, and 64 GB of flash storage.

In 2011, Jobs introduced the iPad 2 as “thinner, lighter, and faster” than the original. The three adjectives so accurately described the new device, thousands of blog and newspaper headlines included those three words.

Try to apply the Rule of 3. Divide a presentation into three parts. Introduce a product with three benefits. Give me three reasons to hire you! The rule of 3—It worked for Jefferson, it worked for Jobs, and it will work for you.

Carmine Gallo is the communications coach for the world’s most admired brands. He is a popular keynote speaker and author of several books, including the international bestsellers The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs and The Innovation Secrets of Steve Jobs. His new book, The Apple Experience: Secrets to Building Insanely Great Customer Loyalty is the first book to reveal the secrets behind the stunning success of the Apple Retail Store. Carmine recently launched an eLearning course titled, The New Rules Of Persuasive Presentations. Follow Carmine on Facebook or Twitter.