

PowerPoint: 6 presentation peeves

Keep slides simple, and practice your lecture

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Effective use of Microsoft PowerPoint can enhance a presentation. Too often, however, speakers obfuscate information by adding fancy effects or showing indecipherable slides, or are ill-prepared or overly dependent on the slides to deliver their message.

PowerPoint is not just for professional lecturers; psychiatrists often are asked to address community or professional organizations and patient advocacy groups. Your ability to clearly explain complicated concepts to lay audiences can help market yourself as a desirable referral source.

This article describes 6 common PowerPoint presentation pitfalls, why they occur, and how to avoid them. Resources to help you create better PowerPoint presentations also are listed (see *Related resources*).

1 THE SPEAKER IS IN THE DARK

We've all seen it: As soon as the speaker starts a PowerPoint presentation, a helpful audience member turns down the lights. Fearing the projection will not be discernible, the speaker elects to make him/herself less visible in deference to the slides.

This misses the point. The audience came to hear you, so the slides should enhance your talk and not compete with you. To overvalue the slides is to ignore years of pedagogic research showing that learning flourishes when teacher and student are actively engaged.

Most modern LCD projectors are powerful enough to use in ambient light. If a slide is difficult to read, it's often because of bad slide design, such as poorly contrasting colors or small type sizes (see peeve number 4).

Dimming the lights during a video presentation is acceptable because video usually is more visible in the dark and is the presentation's focus when running. After the video is finished, restore the lights and return the focus to the speaker.

2 TOO MANY BULLETS

The bulleted list in the PowerPoint default template is not always the best way to display information. Many speakers are reluctant to stray from this style, however, because they doubt their ability to cover all the points or worry that the audience will miss the information on the screen.

Don't worry: Audiences are more likely to remember an effective presentation than perfectly complete slides.

3 HE'S READING, NOT SPEAKING

Speakers sometimes read from bulleted lists because they are not sufficiently familiar with their talk. They either turn away from the audience to read off the projected slides or—more commonly—face the audience but look down to read from a computer monitor.

Watching someone read aloud is boring. The audience will disengage if you appear unprepared and uninterested in them.

There is no substitute for planning and practicing your talk in advance. You don't have to memorize it, but be familiar enough with your talk to require only occasional glances at the monitor. Even talented extemporaneous speakers can improve their performances with planning and practice.

4 'I KNOW YOU CAN'T READ THIS...'

Seemingly every PowerPoint presentation includes at least one slide filled with tiny text and graphics. The speaker will laugh, saying, "I apologize, I know you can't read this, but the point I'm trying to make is..."

This is the worst of many variations of difficult-to-read slides. Speakers also commonly scan material from textbooks into a slide rather than create it anew.

Projecting an indecipherable slide is the inexcusable result of poor planning or laziness. Breaking down a complex idea into understandable chunks of information is hard work, but that is what effective teachers do. Albert Einstein said, "If you can't explain something simply, you don't understand it well." When audiences see

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difficult-to-read slides, they will suspect you don't know what you're talking about.

5 'WINDOWS' DRESSING

PowerPoint has many bells and whistles to enhance a presentation. Avoid them.

Transitions. PowerPoint offers more than 50 ways to transition from one slide to the next. But despite a century of film innovation, Steven Spielberg still relies on the same three transitions D.W. Griffith used in his silent films: the direct cut, the dissolve, and the wipe. All other transitions are rare in professional film; likewise, they have no place in your presentation.

Animations can be useful. For example, a slide with several bullet points is less distracting if the points are introduced one at a time. As with transitions, simple animations are best; watching words fly around a slide before settling in place has lost its novelty.

Graphics. Other built-in PowerPoint functions—such as prepackaged clip art and sound effects—are of little use. The clip art in particular looks lame and outmoded.

If your presentation calls for graphics, use high-quality photographs. PowerPoint supports numerous image formats including BMP, PCX, PNG, JPEG, and GIF (see *Related resources* for a comparison of each format's advantages and disadvantages).

Most images from scanners or digital cameras are at higher resolutions than needed; computer monitors generally cannot display detail beyond 96 dots per inch (DPI), and photographs should be resampled accordingly to reduce file sizes.

WANT MORE INFORMATION ON POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS?
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Related resources

- ▶ TechRepublic.com. 10 slide design tips for producing powerful and effective presentations. <http://articles.techrepublic.com.com/5100-10881-6117178.html>.
- ▶ Microsoft guidelines for selecting a picture format in an Office XP program. <http://support.microsoft.com/kb/320314>.
- ▶ Tufte ER. *The cognitive style of PowerPoint: pitching out corrupts within*. Cheshire CT: Graphics Press; 2006. (Edward Tufte, professor emeritus at Yale University, is an authority on presenting graphic information).
- ▶ Presentation Zen, a blog maintained by Garr Reynolds, former program manager for worldwide user group relations at Apple. www.presentationzen.com.
- ▶ PowerPoint does rocket science. Tufte's analysis shows the mismanagement resulting from NASA's insistence on using PowerPoint to present technical analyses, ultimately leading to the Columbia shuttle disaster. www.edwardtufte.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg?msg_id=0001yB&topic_id=1.
- ▶ Peter Norvig's PowerPoint version of the Gettysburg Address, an intriguing example of "death by PowerPoint." www.norvig.com/Gettysburg.

DISCLOSURE

The author reports no financial relationship with any company whose products are mentioned in this article or with manufacturers of competing products.

Resizing the image within PowerPoint does not change the resolution; you need a photo-editing program such as Adobe Photoshop, Corel Paint

Shop, or Macromedia Fireworks (while there, be sure to crop out unnecessary parts of the photo).

Humor and comics. Including comic strips in a presentation has become somewhat hackneyed and overused. Use comics minimally and only when they help illustrate an important point.

6 'DO YOU HAVE A HANDOUT?'

When audience members request printouts of slide presentations, speakers usually respond with straight printouts of the PowerPoint slides.

This makes little sense. Seeing the slides minus the speaker is like watching a documentary with the narration turned off. The more effective slides are as speaking aids, the less appropriate they are for stand-alone information.

Instead, create annotated slide printouts for distribution. Your best bet is to export the presentation to Microsoft Word, which creates a document containing pictures of the slides with adjacent notes. You could print out your slides using the PowerPoint notes function, but this only lets you print slides or notes on separate documents.

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