

# Packing a punch into your PowerPoint presentations

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**M**any PowerPoint presentations are mind-numbingly boring—and often useless—because some basic guidelines are overlooked during their preparation. As a result, the software ends up failing both the presenter and the audience. It doesn't have to be that way, though. If you use PowerPoint properly, it can enhance your talk, amplify your ideas, and help you deliver your message with maximum impact to an audience that remains engaged—and awake.

How can you make PowerPoint your friend? Here are five guidelines to keep in mind the next time you prepare to use this presentation software program.

## Make an outline

All too many people who have to prepare a talk will sit down at the computer, fire up PowerPoint, and start creating the presentation. The probable result is an uninformative assault on your audience's senses.

There is a better approach. Remember a crucial lesson from your 10th-grade English class: Outline. Outline. Outline. You don't necessarily have to go through the classic alphanumeric outline of I A, B, C; 2 A, B, C, and so on, because PowerPoint has an outline tool that may be useful to you. Better still, you could sketch out—in a Word document—some single-sentence topics as well as ideas for illustrations. Then, by using Word's handy cut-and-paste functions, you can easily shift the order of the topics until you have them in an effective sequence.

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Another option is to use index cards or Post-it notes on a wall or whiteboard to create the outline. Those are easy to rearrange as you work your way through organizing your presentation.

## Supplement content, don't reiterate it

This is probably the No. 1 PowerPoint sin: using the program to duplicate, often word for word, what you are saying. That is problematic because the brain processes auditory and visual input in different channels. And because those channels are independent of each other, it is a good bet your listeners will have trouble paying attention to your talk *and* your slides at the same time. Some members of the audience will listen with rapt attention to your talk and ignore the slides, meaning you will have wasted time creating the presentation, whereas others will read the slides and ignore your speech, meaning they will likely lose out on impromptu clarifications and interesting ad libs.

The more effective approach is to use slides to convey information that will substantiate or expand on your ideas. Are you describing a set of reactions to a drug you observed among a select group of patients in your practice? Then say so, telling the audience a bit about the patients and the medication. *Then* use a slide to list the most prevalent reactions or to present a statistical analysis. Keep quiet for a moment while the audience assimilates what you have presented visually. Some PowerPoint mavens even suggest that once you have allowed a slide to make its point, you can ensure

you regain the audience's attention by having the screen go dark while you continue your talk. On a PC, pressing the B key will do the trick, and pressing it again will retrieve the presentation.

Bonus tip: The sudden emergence of a screensaver during your talk can be disruptive, and a computer's sudden desire to slip into sleep mode or hibernate during your talk could completely destroy it, so disable those functions before you start talking.

## For all to see...

Remember that the words on the slides may have to be read by everyone, including those at the back of the auditorium or lecture room. So although PowerPoint gives you scores of sexy and fun fonts to choose from, stick to one that is clean and simple to use. Sans serif typefaces such as Arial and Calibri are good. For headlines, use a larger font size and opt for a somewhat smaller font size for your regular text (Figure 1).

What about color? This is tricky because there are so many choices and combinations, so keep it simple; less is more (effective). Certain color combinations are easier to read because they provide a reader-friendly contrast. In general, cool colors—blue and green—tend to be better background colors, and warm colors—yellow, orange, and red—work better for text. If the room you are presenting in is going to be dark, you should opt for a darker background with light text; for a light room, you should use a light background with black or darker text. And remember that the combination might look different when

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the slides are projected, so make sure you do a test run before you settle on a color combination. It's a good idea to echo the text and background colors in your graphics as well so that the presentation ties together as a visual whole.

Bear in mind that a small percentage of men have some form of genetic color blindness and that the condition can also be triggered with aging and by eye problems (glaucoma, macular degeneration, or cataracts), eye injuries, or medication side effects, all of which affect how these individuals perceive certain colors, especially the red-green combination. As such, it is probably a good idea to limit the use of the red-green combination.

### Keep it simple

Perhaps the best way to ensure that your audience will get little out of your presentation is to overload each slide with umpteen bullets, each one bearing enough text to fill *War and Peace*. Faced with such an overload of reading material, even slide-loving listeners will be discouraged before they reach the second bullet (Figure 2). The better approach is to populate each slide with three, maybe four, bullets. Keep the sentence length to a line or a line and a half (Figure 3).

The same keep-it-simple rule applies to graphics. If you must use complicated graphics, spreadsheets, or tables, by all means put them on slides. And include those slides only in the version you'll post online or in the printouts of the presentation that you place on the table at the back of the auditorium. That way, those who truly want or need the information will have time to puzzle out what those slides are trying to tell them.

### Prepare, prepare, prepare

This could be the toughest part of your task. After working late into the night on your presentation, the temptation is strong just to give it a quick look-over. However, let one factual or

## Use Sans Serif Fonts

- They aren't fancy, but they are easy to read.
- Sans serif fonts include **Calibri**, **Arial**, **Verdana**, and **Tahoma**.
- Use 44- to 48-point fonts for headlines, but smaller font sizes (32 or 36, for example) for text.

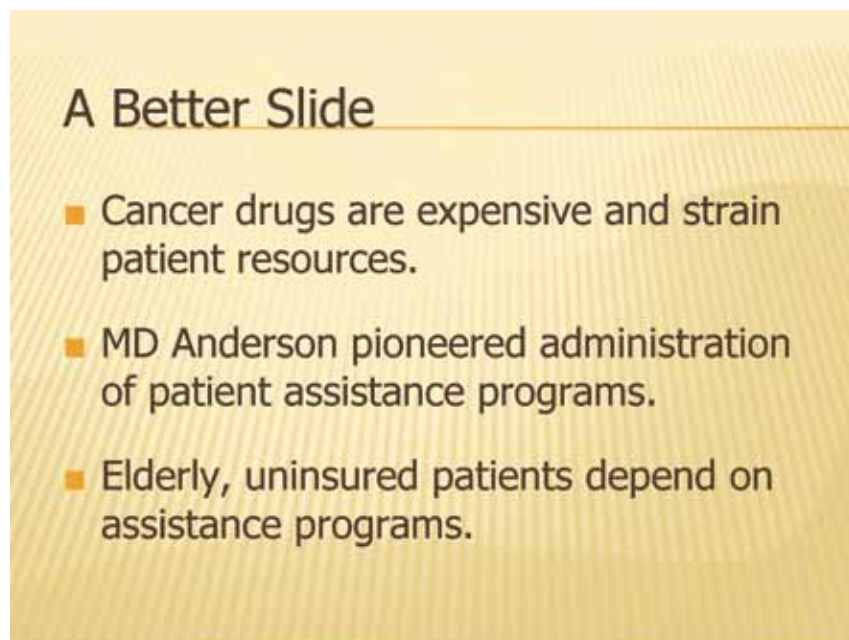
**FIGURE 1** Choose fonts and colors wisely and consider the lighting in the room where your presentation will be viewed (compare Figure 3). If the room will be dark, choose a dark-blue or dark-green background and white or light-colored type. Once you pick a type face (we've used Calibri here), stick with the same font throughout all of your slides. Another way to avoid having your slides look like ransom notes: Choose one size for your headlines and a smaller size for your bullet points and other text and use it repeatedly.

## This Is a Mind-Numbing Slide

### Too many bullets, too much text

- Oral anticancer and supportive care agents administered to cancer patients are costly and are associated with large copayment requirements or are often not fully reimbursed by private health insurers or Medicare.
- A systematic review of PAPs found improvements in disease indicator outcomes for patients with common chronic diseases who access these programs. However, knowledge about the use of PAPs among cancer patients is limited.
- Cancer patients eligible for PAPs at MDACC include those who are uninsured, those who are underinsured, those whose pharmacy benefit limits have been reached, and those whose private health or government insurance has denied coverage of certain oral medications.
- Approval for this study was obtained from the MDACC Institutional Review Board.
- Prescription data were extracted from a pharmacy administrative dispensing database.
- We extracted patient billing charge per medication fill in dollars by the date of pickup in the outpatient pharmacy.
- In comparison to PAP nonusers, PAP users were, on average, younger (48 vs 52 years), indigent (73% vs 19%), white (50% vs 43%), and covered by Medicaid or were uninsured (75% vs 20%). PAP users also had more prescriptions fills (median = 30 vs 20) during the study period at the institution.

**FIGURE 2** Slide overload—too many bullets and too much text—is perhaps the most common error people make when preparing a PowerPoint presentation—and one of the easiest to avoid. Each of these bullet points could easily fill an entire slide and be more memorable because of it. The same rule applies to graphics; keep them simple and uncluttered. It doesn't cost any more to create 50 slides than to create 10; don't be afraid to stretch out your bullet points and numerical data over several slides to get your message across to your audience. They will be more alert and thank you for it with their attention.



**FIGURE 3** Here's an example of an effective slide from a PowerPoint presentation prepared for viewing in a well-lit room. Note the light background, dark type, consistent type face (Tahoma) and size (44 points for the headline and 34 points for the text), and sparse amount of text; no more than eight words are included in each bullet point. To liven things up a little without distracting the reader, the presenter underscored the headline with a thin orange-colored rule and used matching solid orange bullets.

typographical error or a sentence with funny syntax make its way into your presentation, and it could puncture the credibility of your entire talk. Even after you are sure you have read the

presentation carefully on the monitor and have run it through PowerPoint's spelling and grammar checker, print it out and read it again, word for word. I have been writing on computers for

30 years and am still amazed how, after repeatedly applying a gimlet eye at my copy on the monitor, I find typos, grammatical errors, and evidence of sloppy logic when I review a hard-copy version of my work. Even after you have scrutinized your slides on paper, don't be satisfied. Have someone whose knowledge of English you trust edit and proof your work.

After your slides have been thoroughly vetted, get access to a projector and a large conference or lecture room. Stand way in the back and study each slide as it appears on that far-away wall. If you were in the audience, would you be satisfied with what you are seeing?

When you are satisfied with your presentation, call or e-mail the tech support people at the venue where you will be making your presentation. Tell them what kind of a laptop you have and ensure that the right projector and a set of cables will be available for your use. And, oh yes, put a copy of your presentation on a DVD or a USB flash drive. If your laptop goes south, you can use that backup to run your now-brilliant PowerPoint effort from someone else's computer.