

PowerPoint Tips and Techniques

Robert Harris

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As both the creator and recipient (often victim) of many PowerPoint presentations, I would like to share some basic ideas for making these presentations more effective.

Tips for Avoiding Death by PowerPoint

Here is a list of bad presentation practices that contribute to Death by PowerPoint, together with some ideas about how to avoid them.

Too many words.

There are many different guidelines about the maximum number of words that should be on one slide. The rule of 4 by 5 says four bullet points of five words each. The rule of 33 says a maximum of 33 words per slide. There isn't really a single, hard and fast rule. The basic idea is that too many words make the audience a bunch of bookworms (screenworms?) instead of listeners. And, of course, the more words you try to put on one slide, the smaller the type needs to be, making reading the slide an increasingly challenging activity. I've seen purported presentations with 100 or even 150 words on a slide. Good thing the type was too small to read because no one wanted to read all that anyway. If you have that many words to present, use a handout.

Too much time on one slide.

The idea of a PowerPoint presentation is to supply a visual aid while you talk. Bullet points or graphics help support and clarify your discussion. But if you leave one slide up too long, your audience will lose focus and their attention will wander. There just isn't that much on one slide to find interesting for more than two or three minutes. If you're really dynamic and interesting and possibly good looking, and if you tell stories well, you might squeeze four or five minutes out of a slide. The only exceptions to a five-minute warning might be a slide with an embedded video or a slide that serves as a place holder while the audience does an exercise or discusses the points on the slide with the presenter. Otherwise, keep it snappy and move along. But see the next issue.

Too little time on one slide.

Remember, it's a presentation, not channel surfing. Flashing through slides is dizzying and confusing. You might even have had something someone found interesting on one of those passing slides, in which case your audience will be both confused and irritated. Relax and take the time to discuss (not just read!) each bullet. Explain that graph. Interpret the photo. If a slide isn't worth at least a minute or two of consideration, why did you include it? A quick transitional slide for, say, humorous impact (like a slide made with Word Art saying, "But wait! There's more!") can be shown for just ten seconds, but slides with content need a longer life.

Too many slides.

One reason some presenters spend so little time on each slide is that they have too many slides to present in a limited amount of time. But, as with all things, there are natural limits to the desired PowerPoint experience. Just as you might love a two-hour action adventure film but not like a six-hour one, so too a PowerPoint presentation of perhaps 20 slides (for about an hour) is probably pressing the limits of endurance of a PowerPoint audience. This means, of course, that a deck (as some people call it) of 60 slides is ridiculous. (I've seen a 62-slide presentation with more than 100 words per slide. What exactly was the presenter thinking?) Now, if you allow breaks for meals and vacations between every few slides, and if your presentation is stretched out over a long period, you might have a lot of slides. But is that really going to maintain interest and freshness and effectiveness? Just because you know how to copy and paste doesn't mean you should make *War and Peace* into a PowerPoint presentation.

Slides that are all words.

Presentations that are all words are the most snoozy and boring possible. People love visuals--whether for the purposes of evidence, example, illustration, or just decoration. You can make an otherwise hard-to-endure presentation into something quite passable by adding some pictures--or diagrams or other visuals. Pictures aid memory, add interest, and keep the audience looking at the slide. If all you have are words, why project them? Why aren't you using a sheet of paper instead?

Bullet points that leave out the articles.

When you leave out the articles--the *a*, *an*, and *the*--the result is a kind of non-English that sounds wooden and almost hostile. People (native English speakers, at least) don't really talk without articles, so when we see this language in bullet points, it comes across as klunky. Compare the difference, noting the natural feel of the second example:

- Use wildcard symbol to expand search
- Use a wildcard symbol to expand the search

Gimmicky transitions and effects.

Here is a case where you shouldn't do something just because you can. PowerPoint has all kinds of possible transitions between slides and all kinds of possible effects within each slide. But in a professional business setting, a bunch of pinwheels can appear almost childish. So test your effects before you include them. I don't normally use any transitions between slides, preferring instead to use the default "appear." I do use various entrance effects to display bullet points individually (see below). If you like transitions between slides, for professional presentations, stick to one style or two related styles (such as slide in from left and slide in from right). If some elements of your presentation call attention to themselves as elements, your audience will be distracted from the content. An analogy is women's make up. If you can see the make up, it's too much. Instead of saying, "My, that woman is pretty," an observer says, "My, that woman is wearing a lot of make up." Similarly, if you have a bunch of gimmicky, garish effects that call attention to themselves, your audience, instead of saying, "My, what an effective presentation," will say, "My, what a bunch of gimmick effects."

Corny sound effects.

Showing a switch rotate and supplying a click at the right time is a great use of sound effects. But setting off buzzers, bells, whistles, crashing sounds, and the like just for random effect will certainly reduce your street cred among the members of your audience.

Tips for Better Presentations

Use color.

It sometimes amazes me how many PowerPoint presentations are still basically black and white. Color doesn't cost anything to put in a presentation. Find a colorful template, add color photos, change font colors, do something to appeal to the color sense.

Use contrast.

Breaking News. This Just In. Text on a PowerPoint slide is intended to be read. So don't put dark gray text on a black background or light yellow text on a white background. Be sure that your text and background have substantial contrast with each other. White letters on dark blue, black letters on white, something easy to read.

Display bullet points individually.

Someone famous (Samuel Johnson? Aristotle?) said that in writing (and here I paraphrase because I'm too lazy to hunt for hours for the exact quotation), "Something should be revealed and something should be concealed." For any writing students out there, that means that in those short essays for your high school or college classes, don't list in the introduction every point you plan to develop. Okay, I'll get focused now. It's really best not to flash on your audience's eyeballs all the bullet points on a slide all at once. Use one of the many entrance effects to make them appear one at a time when you are ready to discuss them. This technique helps maintain your audience's focus and interest.

Add graphics.

Graphics add visual appeal. And pictures are processed by the brain more quickly and easily than text. A diagram can make a process or idea clear almost immediately where words alone would simply not work. Metaphors (such as a picture of a puzzle when you're discussing problem solving) help cement concepts in memory. Graphics can help explain and illustrate--and hold interest.

Animated gifs work very well. One very good source is [Animation Factory at www.animationfactory.com](http://www.animationfactory.com).

Good photographs can bring power and clarity to the ideas in your presentation. A great source of free stock photography is [Stock.xchnng at www.sxc.hu](http://www.sxc.hu). And if you have a few dollars, an inexpensive stock photography site is [iStockphoto at www.istockphoto.com](http://www.istockphoto.com).

Audio--Music and Sound Effects

The default for PowerPoint 2003 is to link all audio files larger than 100KB, though you can go to Tools, Options, General and raise this minimum. Even so, in my experience, midi files are linked rather than embedded regardless of the file size or the setting on the General tab. This means that when you copy a PowerPoint presentation from one place to another (folder to desktop, network drive to flash drive), you must copy the audio files also or you won't have any sound other than those small .wma files that are embedded.

When you add a music (or video) file, PowerPoint adds the path as a link. So, if you are working in D:/MyPowerpoints/Sample.ppt and your audio file is in F:/Vacation/Sounds/birdcall.wma

Video

PowerPoint is happiest with avi and wmv video files. Because avi files tend to be huge, wmv is the best choice. It runs nicely inside a slide. Remember, though, that the video file is linked to the slide rather than embedded in the PowerPoint itself, so that if you copy the presentation, you must copy the wmv file(s) also, and keep presentation and video files in the same folder.

A note on video in PowerPoint over WebEx.

To show a PowerPoint with embedded video over a WebEx presentation, you must convert the PowerPoint presentation into a Universal Communications File (.ucf extension) using a PowerPoint plug-in available from WebEx. You also must allow time for the video to load (once you get to that slide) at all the connected sites.