

Designing Effective Presentations

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Presentation Tips

Clear message

From the first slide, you want to convey to your audience the reason you are giving this presentation and the central message or motivation you want them to get from it.

Logical Flow

Place your slides in an order that makes sense to your audience. Give simple summaries at the beginning and expand on topics in that order. Offer regular “sub-title” slides in long presentations to indicate shifts in topic or progress through a sequence.

One idea per slide

Each slide should have a single point. Once you address this point you should move on to the next slide. Shifting visuals regularly will help keep the audience’s attention on your presentation. If you find yourself pausing or changing topics in the middle of a slide, you should split this information into two (or more) slides.

Match the number of slides to length of talk

It takes a certain amount of time to present a slide. Some take longer than others, but you will have an average (about 2 min / slide is a good starting guide). Keep in mind how many minutes you have to present, and how many minutes you want to leave for activities or discussion. Create only the number of slides you can reasonably cover in the time you have (with wiggle room for late starts and questions).

Combine speech, text, and visuals

Bullet point after bullet point after bullet point will eventually make your audience numb. If every slide is all text and a similar format there will not be enough visual variety to keep everyone’s attention (some people may even stop noticing when the slide changes).

Try not to use too much text on the slides. Short phrases, diagrams, graphs, photographs and other graphic images provide more visual variety and don’t distract your audience from what you are saying.

Say more than you show

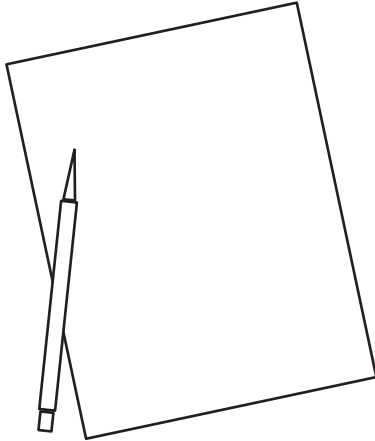
Once your audience realizes that you are just reading your slides, they will tune you out and just copy down the information off the slide (or if it is already printed, pull out a magazine).

Never read your slides to your audience. A literate audience will read everything on a slide faster than you can say it and if you are still reading when they are done, they will tune you out.

Each slide should be an introduction to what you are saying about that topic. Use images or short phrases as a starting point and expand on the visual message with what you are saying.

Planning a Presentation

Step One: Review time and space limitations



Do this stage on paper, postit notes, chalkboard, whiteboard, or on a napkin. Above all, avoid touching the computer until you have a plan.

How much time will you have?

Using slides can force you to follow a specific order at a specific pace. Do not create more slides than you can reasonably cover in the amount of time you have. Two minutes per slide is a good rule (adjust this to match your own pace). If you are concerned about staying on track, put “time checks” in your notes so that you can see how many minutes each point should take and check yourself while presenting.

Remember to put in time for introductions, breaks, interruptions, and questions at the end. It is better to have plenty of time at the end than to rush, skip items, or run over your allotted time.

What is the layout of the room?

What you can present will change depending on the room. Plan for how you can take advantage of blackboards, tables, and seating arrangements. Keep an eye out for limitations such as afternoon sun, location of plugs, and obstructed blackboards.

What equipment is available?

Is there a blackboard? a projector? a screen? network access? If you can’t check ahead, come prepared for anything: powerstrips, extension chords, chalk, dry-erase markers, paper, large sheets of paper, tape, network cables, overhead film, hand puppets, whatever helps you adapt to the space, or take advantage of what’s there.

Step Two: Focus on your goal

Clearly define what effect you want this presentation to have: persuasion, motivation, understanding etc. The more specific you make your goal, the easier it will be to build the presentation and the more effective it will be.

Understand your audience

Your audience has their own reason for being in the room with you. The more you understand their background and motivations, the better you will be able to meet your goals. Pay special attention to:

- what they already know about your topic
(use this to adjust your pace and use of jargon)
- what information they will see as most “valuable”
(if this matches your goals, this will be easy; if not, use this to draw attention to points you see as important)
- what experiences they have in common
(tying aspects of your presentation to their personal experience helps build understanding and reinforce memory)

Identify your key points

Based on your goal and your audience, decide what the key points of your presentation will be. Think about what graphics or text will convey these points best. Prioritize the points themselves and what is needed to convey each point effectively. Complex ideas may need to be broken down into several slides.

Planning a Presentation (continued...)

Step Three: Sketch it out on paper

Rough out a simple time sequence

Divide up the time you have and figure out how much time each point will take. Roughing this out helps you figure out how much time you really have and what can be left out. (Easier to do it now than doing it after you put the time into creating slides.)

Sketch out a storyboard of what you will show

If you are a compelling speaker and your topic requires no visuals, you will need no visuals to keep the audience's attention. However, for most speakers, some visuals are necessary to help the audience focus on the words being spoken or illustrate visual aspects of the topic. These visuals can be drawn "live" on a blackboard, or prepared ahead as transparencies or Powerpoint slides.

A "storyboard" is simply tiny sketches in boxes of what will appear on each slide. Draw simple diagrams of what will appear on the slide (such as a box for a photo or a few lines of a graph). Annotate the point expressed by each slide. This helps you make sure you have visual variety in your presentation.

Some tips for selecting what to show:

Provide a variety of visuals that illustrate the points you are making. The change from slide to slide keeps the audience's attention from wandering, and the visuals themselves can help provide additional perspectives on the topic. If all you have in your show is slide after slide of bullet lists, the lack of visual interest will cause your audience to zone out.

Use images that relate to the topic. If a cartoon or images doesn't relate to the topic, it will just be distracting. Select images that will engage the audience, make them think, or illuminate a point.

Provide a "structure" for your talk. Include a title slide and outline (or goals) slide at the beginning and a summary slide and "finish" slide at the end. Provide "sign-post" slides along the way to introduce major topics and show progress (one possible place for bullet lists). Build up complex processes or diagrams over several slides.

Write up a simple script

Use note cards or paper to record specific details that you want to include in your speech such as phrases, facts and dates (the PowerPoint "Notes" view can help with this). To keep your presentation lively, keep only rough notes. If you need to write out your whole speech, practice it until you can say it naturally without sounding like you are reading.

Don't confuse your slides with lecture notes. If you need a teleprompter, turn off the projector and turn your screen so you can face the audience. Even this will be more effective than reading your text from slides that they can see. Check out the "Presenter's View" in PowerPoint as a way to simultaneously view your notes while projecting your slides.

Planning a Presentation (continued...)

Step Four: Consider handouts and note taking

In any lecture, the audience is likely to take notes. If your presentation is heavy on the content, assist effective note taking by providing clear outlines (on a slide, blackboard or handouts), highlighting important points, and providing adequate pauses for note-takers to catch up after large blocks of content. Putting less on your slides will also help note taking, because the audience will be less inclined to copy down the text they see, and more likely to write ideas in their own words.

You can also shape note taking by providing a handout with some elements filled in (such as glossary terms or an outline of the main topics) so that the audience is given the basics and then can spend time adding their own interpretations. Another useful kind of handout is source notes or URLs for further exploration on the topic.

Avoid handing out all of your slides or lecture notes *before* the presentation; this undermines the “discovery” moments in your talk, which are essential if you want the audience to pay attention and remember the main points of your talk. If you want to give out notes or slides for use as a reference, hand them out or post them afterwards.

If you have large amounts of data or detailed information you want to the audience to refer to during the talk, it is ok to hand it out. It is detailed descriptions of the “plot” of your talk that gives things away.

Step Five: Plan Activities

If your plans include discussion or audience participation, be sure to budget enough time. Something as simple as asking each person to introduce themselves can take a lot of time if the group is large (or talkative). Small group discussions always require transition time at the start and the end.

When starting any activity, give clear instructions about the goal, and even provide a simple model of what you expect (for instance, introduce yourself first, or have a “plant” set the expectations.)

Designing the Show

As you build your presentation, review the storyboard (or the “Slide Sorter view in PowerPoint) and look for the following:

Is the design consistent and appropriate?

Do all the slides look related? If layout, colors, fonts, font sizes and other graphic elements change radically from slide to slide, the visual flow will be jarring and confusing. Make all the slides consistent in their overall design (using the Master in PowerPoint makes this easy).

Be sure that the colors and fonts you use are appropriate to your topic. If a background or special effect doesn't relate directly to what you are talking about, leave it out.

Are the slides easy to read and understand?

Are the most important ideas visually obvious? Even at this view your main points should stand out as the most visually interesting slides.

If there are several sections, are they clearly defined? As you move from main point to main point in the talk, provide a visual (such as a simple title slide) that makes the change from topic to topic obvious.

Make sure to clearly label the basic segments of the talk: title slides, outline, section headers, and the finish. This will help the audience know where they are during your presentation.

Is there enough visual variety?

Is there enough visual variety in the content? If every slide is a bullet list, the presentation will be visually monotonous. Use a mixture of images, text, graphs and other visuals to make sure the audience notices the change from slide to slide.

Are there opportunities for the audience make their own discoveries?

If everything is spelled out, the audience is less engaged and will remember less of the presentation. Make sure that some slides give the audience time to think about a question, or consider an image before you jump in to explain it. Even a short pause when a slide comes up will give them enough time to think for themselves.

Are there blank areas for pauses or note taking?

If you are taking time in the presentation for questions or pauses, reflect that by including “blank” slides. Blank or incomplete slides can also be useful if you want to leave room for making notes on the slides using a tablet or pad.

Designing Individual Slides

Make each slide look like it belongs

Using a consistent font and color scheme means that each slide will flow into the next without distracting the audience from the content. Using the “Slide Master” in PowerPoint will make this easy. Set the sizes for the titles and the text and stick with them. Occasional variation is OK as long as there is a clear reason (such as a new kind of content) .

Make the text readable

For most venues, follow these guidelines:

Use Large Type: 24 pt or Larger

Titles should be big (32 pt or larger). Incidental information, such as captions, can be smaller (but no smaller than 18pt).

Make Sure Phrases Read Well

Make sure lines break logically. If the type gets so large that phrases are broken in strange places it will be harder to read.

Use Plain Sans-Serif Fonts: Arial, Helvetica etc.

Like road signs, slides are most readable when the type is simple. Sans-serif fonts (Arial, Helvetica) are more readable at a distance because they don't have “feet” like serif fonts (Times, Palatino).

Avoid “Fancy” Fonts

Most of these fonts are unreadable at a distance. Also, if the font is missing from the computer you present on, your design will fall apart.

Use High-Contrast Colors: Light on Dark

Slides are the reverse of print: at a distance, light text on a dark background is most readable. White or yellow on a dark blue works best. Avoid saturated colors that clash or vibrate (such as red/green).

Use Plain Backgrounds

The PowerPoint's template designs all contain images or abstract patterns that can be distracting. It is better to stick with a plain background or a pattern that is simple and plane (like a paper grain).

Make the image or text on the slide memorable

Consider each slide as an introduction to what you are about to say. When the slide appears, the audience will immediately start to process the picture or read the text. Give them a moment and then start talking about what they see.

Slides are most memorable if they make the audience “figure out” what is going on. A question or short statement that leads them to think is better than a statement of fact. An image to which you add labels or explain will be more memorable because of the initial moment of mystery than a fully-formed diagram.

Make sure that all images relate to the points you make. Adding unrelated images to make it “interesting” will merely confuse the audience as they try to make connections.

Resources:

Views on Presentation Design

Is Powerpoint Evil?

Eduard Tufte thinks PowerPoint makes it too easy to make bad presentations and that these presentations are leading people to make very bad decisions:

“**PowerPoint is Evil**” Tufte, Wired Magazine, 2003 September.
<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/ppf2.html>

“**The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint**” Tufte, Graphics Press
<http://www.edwardtufte.com/tufte/powerpoint>

Donald Norman thinks that PowerPoint has nothing to do with bad presentations; presenters made the same mistakes before it was invented. This includes tips on how to make a good presentation.

“**In Defense of PowerPoint**” Norman, jnd.org
http://www.jnd.org/dn.mss/in_defense_of_p.html

Applying Cognitive Research to Learning and Lectures

Robert Bjork has written extensively on the ways we can apply what we know about memory to make learning and teaching more effective. In this article, Patricia deWinstanley summarizes these ideas and suggests practical ways to apply these ideas to making lectures more effective:

“**Successful Lecturing: Presenting Information in Ways That Engage Effective Processing**” deWinstanley, Bjork. *New Directions for Teaching & Learning*; Spring 2002 Issue 89, p19, 13p

Full text available online through the UMass Amherst Library:
<http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&an=9175125>

Examples of Interesting Presentation Styles:

The following presentations use interesting techniques (rapid pace, graphics, etc.) to break out of the standard PowerPoint model.

Example of Pecha-Kucha - Daniel Pink

In Pecha-Kucha you get 20 slides / 20 seconds each to make your point.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NZOt6BkhUg>

Identity 2.0 OSCON 2005 Keynote - , Dick Hardt

<http://www.identity20.com/media/OSCON2005/>
<http://blame.ca/dick/>

Who Owns Culture – Lawrence Lessig

<http://wilcoworld.net/wired/>

Lessig Interview: http://www.sociablemedia.com/articles_lessig.htm

Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information – David Byrne

<http://www.davidbyrne.com/art/eeee/>

Resources:**Giving Effective Presentations****Web Sites****Beyond Bullets** - Cliff Atkinson<http://www.beyondbulletpoints.com/>**InformIT - Presenting Professionally with PowerPoint** - Tom Bunzel<http://www.informit.com/guides/content.asp?g=msoffice&seqNum=66>**Presentation Zen** - Garr Reynolds<http://www.presentationzen.com/>

(Presentation Zen is also available as a book.)

Books

(available online through Books 24/7 on the UMass Library Site)

Beyond Bullet Points: Using Microsoft PowerPoint to Create Presentations that Inform, Motivate, and Inspire

Cliff Atkinson, Microsoft Press © 2005 (238 pages), ISBN:0735620520

<http://library.books24x7.com/toc.asp?bookid=12491>**How to Prepare, Stage, and Deliver Winning Presentations**

Thomas Leech, AMACOM © 2004 (336 pages), ISBN:0814472311

<http://library.books24x7.com/toc.asp?bookid=13776>**Give Great Presentations:****How To Speak Confidently and Make Your Point**

A&C Black, A & C Black © 2005 (96 pages), ISBN:0747577358

<http://library.books24x7.com/toc.asp?bookid=13739>**Presentations: How to Calm Down, Think Clearly, and Captivate Your Audience**

David G. Lee and Kristie J. Nelson-Neuhaus, Personnel Decisions

International Corp. © 2002 (164 pages), ISBN:0938529234

<http://library.books24x7.com/toc.asp?bookid=13242>**Online Videos****Don't read from your PowerPoint slides** - TJWalkerhttp://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVKfz0J_mPA**Guy Kawasaki 10-20-30 Presentation Rule**<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liQLdRk0Ziw>