

Creating PowerPoint Presentations

PowerPoint can be a wonderful tool to use to aid a presentation, as it gives the audience a powerful visual reference that highlights what you are talking about. An audience can soon bore of a tedious PowerPoint presentation though, so make sure you follow these ten points to a successful presentation.

1. Keep it simple

PowerPoint uses slides with a horizontal or “Landscape” orientation. The software was designed as a convenient way to display graphical information that would support the speaker and supplement the presentation. The slides themselves were never meant to be the main focus. The audience came to hear you and be moved / informed by you and your message. Don’t let your message and your ability to tell a story get derailed by slides that are unnecessarily complicated. Nothing in your slide should be superfluous, ever. Your slides should have plenty of “white space” or “negative space.” Do not feel compelled to fill empty areas on your slide with your logo or other unnecessary graphics or text boxes that do not contribute to better understanding. The less clutter you have on your slide, the more powerful your visual message will become.

2. Limit bullet points and text

Your presentation is for the benefit of the audience. However, boring an audience with bullet point after bullet point is of little benefit to them. The best slides may have no text at all. This may sound insane but the best PowerPoint slides will be virtually meaningless without the narration (that is you). Remember, the slides are meant to support the narration of the speaker, not make the speaker superfluous. If you have a detailed handout or publication for the audience to be passed out **after** your talk, you need not feel compelled to fill your PowerPoint slides with a great deal of text. Audiences are much better served receiving a detailed, written handout as a takeaway from the presentation, rather than a mere copy of your PowerPoint slides.



Try to avoid text-heavy (sleep inducing) slides like this. Aim for something like this simple slide above. And this is even better...

3. Limit transitions & animations

Use object builds and slide transitions cautiously. Object builds (also called animations), such as bullet points, should not be animated on every slide. Some animation is a good thing, but stick to the most subtle and professional (similar to what you might see on the evening TV news broadcast). A simple “Wipe Left-to-Right” (from the “Animations” menu) is good for a bullet point, but a “Move” or “Fly” for example is too tedious and slow. Listeners will get bored very quickly if they are asked to endure slide after slide of animation. For transitions between slides, use no more than two or three different types of transition effects and do not place transition effects between all slides.

4. Use high quality photos

Use high-quality graphics including photographs. You can take your own high-quality photographs with your digital camera, purchase professional stock photography, or use the plethora of high-quality images available on line (however, be cautious of copyright issues). Never simply stretch a small, low-resolution photo to make it fit your layout; doing so will degrade the resolution even further. Avoid using PowerPoint Clip Art or other cartoonish line art. Again, if it is included in the software, your audience has seen it a million times before. It may have been interesting in 1993, but today the inclusion of such clip art often undermines the professionalism of the presenter. There are exceptions, of course, and not all PowerPoint art is dreadful, but use it carefully and thoughtfully.

5. Have a visual theme but avoid using PowerPoint templates

You clearly need a consistent visual theme throughout your presentation. Most templates included in PowerPoint however, have been seen by your audience countless times. Your audience expects a unique presentation with new content. Therefore, shy away from any supporting visuals, such as the ever-present PowerPoint Design Template, that suggests your presentation is formulaic or prepackaged. You can make your own background templates which will be more tailored to your needs. You can then save the PowerPoint file as a Design Template (.pot) and the new template will appear among your standard Microsoft templates for your future use.

6. Use appropriate graphs

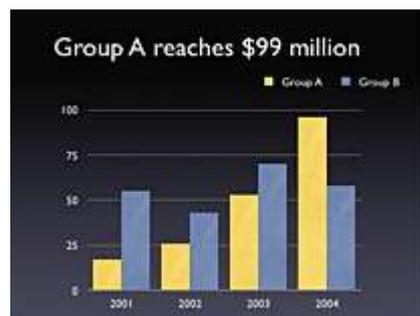
Always be asking yourself, "How much detail do I need?" Presenters are usually guilty of including too much data in their on-screen graphs. There are several ways to display your data in graphic form. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

Pie Charts.



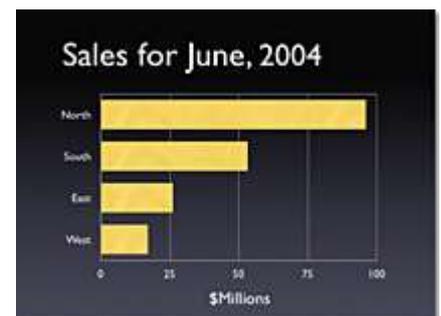
Best used to show percentages.

Vertical Bar Charts.



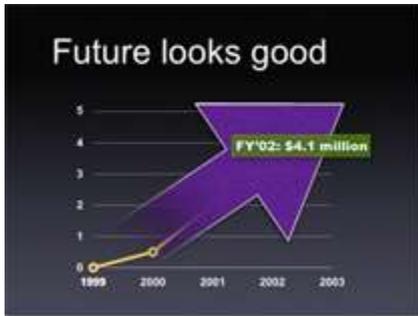
Best used to show changes in quantity over time.

Horizontal Bar Charts.



Best used to show changes in quantity.

Line Charts.



Best used to demonstrate trends

7. Use colour well

Colour evokes feelings. Colour is emotional. The right colour can help persuade and motivate. Studies show that colour usage can increase interest and improve learning comprehension and retention.

You do not need to be an expert in colour theory, but it is good to know at least a bit on the subject. Colours can be divided into two general categories: Cool (such as blue and green) and Warm (such as orange and red). Cool colours work best for backgrounds as they appear to recede away from us into the background. Warm colours generally work best for objects in the foreground (such as text) because they appear to be coming at us. It is no surprise, then, that the most universal PowerPoint slide colour scheme includes a blue background with yellow text. You do not need to feel compelled to use this colour scheme, though you may choose to use a variation of those colours.

If you will be presenting in a dark room (such as a large hall), then a dark background (dark blue, grey, etc.) with white or light text will work fine. But if you plan to keep most of the lights on (which is highly advisable) then a white background with black or dark text works much better. In rooms with a good deal of ambient light, a screen image with a dark background and light text tends to washout, but dark text on a light background will maintain its visual intensity a bit better.

8. Choose your fonts well

Fonts communicate subtle messages in and of themselves, which is why you should choose fonts deliberately. Use the same font set throughout your entire slide presentation, and use no more than two complementary fonts (e.g., Arial and Arial Bold). Make sure you know the difference between a Serif font (e.g., Times New Roman) and a Sans-Serif font (Helvetica or Arial). Serif fonts were designed to be used in documents filled with lots of text. Serif fonts are said to be easier to read at small point sizes, but for on screen presentations the serifs tend to get lost due to the relatively low resolution of projectors. San-serif fonts are generally best for PowerPoint presentations, but try to avoid the abundant Helvetica. Regardless of what font you choose, make sure the text can be read from the back of the room.

A Serif Font

Times New Roman

Sans Serif
Sans Serif

Arial Black and Arial

9. Use video or audio

Use video and audio when appropriate. Using video clips to show concrete examples promotes active cognitive processing, which is the natural way people learn. You can use video clips within PowerPoint without ever leaving the application or tuning on a VCR. Using a video clip not only will illustrate your point better, it will also serve as a change of pace thereby increasing the interest of your audience. You can use audio clips (such as interviews) as well. Something to avoid, however, is cheesy sound effects that are included in PowerPoint (such as the sound of a horn or applause when transitioning slides). The use of unnecessary sound effects attached to animations is a sure way to lose credibility with your audience.

10. Spend time editing

According to the Segmentation Principle of multimedia learning theory, people comprehend better when information is presented in small chunks or segments. By getting out of the Slide View and into the Slide Sorter view, you can see how the logical flow of your presentation is progressing. In this view you may decide to break up one slide into, two or three slides, so that your presentation has a more natural and logical flow. In the Slide Sorter view you will be able to capture more of the look and feel of your entire presentation from the point of view of your audience. You will also notice more unnecessary pieces of information that can be removed to increase visual clarity and improve communication.