preventing death by PowerPoint®

Tips for effective presentations that inform and engage

by Chip Donohue

To understand what I mean by 'Death by PowerPoint®' simply think back to the worst PowerPoint® lecture, conference presentation, or business seminar you’ve ever experienced. You lived to tell the story, but I bet your life flashed before your eyes more than once and the phrase, "Will someone please put me out of my misery?" kept coming to mind. Now think about a time when you created a PowerPoint® slide show that you were so excited to use in a presentation only to have the audience hit the snooze button.

PowerPoint® and other familiar presentation graphics programs like Apple® Keynote, Corel® Presentations®, Harvard Graphics® Pro Presentations, Lotus® Freelance Graphics, and OpenOffice Impress can help you become a more effective presenter. These programs are designed to organize your words and images to create slides, speaker notes, and handouts that display information and enhance your speech or presentation . . . or so they claim. They each include a variety of tools, templates, and themes that make it easy to create eye-catching, professional looking presentations in no time . . . or so they claim.

If all of this is true, why do things go so horribly wrong so much of the time?

You’ve already seen enough boring PowerPoint® slides and struggled to stay awake during enough mind-numbing presentations to last a lifetime. In this article I’ve identified dos and don’ts so that you can live by the PowerPoint® golden rule:

*Present unto others as you would have them present unto you.*

PowerPoint® don’ts

Take a look at this list and think about what you’ve had done unto you and what you’ve done unto others.

Everything but the kitchen sink — PowerPoint® is easy to use, but that means it is also easy to overdo with words, images, and effects.

Don’t try to pack everything on to every slide and into each presentation.

Don’t include too much text or content on a slide or information in a presentation.

Don’t use too many slides, colors, fonts, font styles, builds, transitions, special effects, graphics, or images.

Don’t fill all the space on every slide.

Don’t let the slides distract from your message.

Read all about it — Your spoken remarks should expand upon and describe what’s on the screen, not simply recite the words on the slides.

Don’t read every word on every slide.

Don’t make the audience read instead of listen.

Don’t make them feel like they’re not smart enough to read for themselves or to understand.

Don’t diminish the impact of your visual message by focusing attention only on the written words.

Time flies when you’re having fun — It is easy to get so caught up in the details of each slide that you cause the audience to lose track of exactly what your message is.

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Don’t lose track of time. It is easy to run over when you try to cover every detail on every slide.

Don’t get caught in the PowerPoint® trap. Just because it’s on the slide doesn’t mean you have to say it. Just because you created the slide doesn’t mean everyone has to see it.

Don’t forget that when you skip a slide the audience will wonder what they missed.

Don’t forget that when you move to the next slide before they’ve had a chance to finish reading it, they’ll be thinking about what they didn’t read instead of what you’re saying now.

**PowerPoint® dos**

The best PowerPoint® presentations include text that is easy to read, charts and illustrations that are easy to understand, and images and graphics that reinforce what the topic is. Reduce the amount of time the audience spends reading the presentation to increase the amount of time they spend listening to, and thinking about, your message. Here are some tips for ending PowerPoint® torture.

**Keep it simple** — Simplify and limit the number of words on each screen. Use keywords and include only essential information to communicate your message.

**Less is more** — Keep the design clean and uncluttered. Leave empty space around the text and graphics to focus attention and improve readability.

**Avoid ‘bells and whistles’** — Don’t fall in love with the special effects. Save your passion for your message.

**Be consistent** — Variety may be the spice of life, but it’s better to limit the number of fonts, colors, backgrounds, and effects for clarity and readability.

**Pick your fonts** — There is an almost unlimited combination of fonts, font styles, and font sizes you can use, but one or two will usually do.

- Select sans-serif fonts such as Arial, Calibri, or Tahoma that are easy to read.
- Avoid serif fonts such as Times New Roman or Courier that are more difficult to read.
- Avoid using decorative fonts like Old English Text or script fonts like Lucida Handwriting that look nice but are difficult to read on screen.
- Use a single font for most of your presentation. Vary font colors, sizes, and styles for titles, headers, and emphasis.
- Use bold or italic typeface for emphasis but avoid **underlining**.
- Do not use ALL CAPS except for titles.
- Follow simple guidelines for text size. For titles use 40-50 pt. For text use no smaller than 24 point.

**Choose your colors** — A striking contrast between words, graphics, and background can be very effective in conveying both your message and emotion, but too much color can quickly become distracting or overwhelming.

- Use text colors sparingly — one color for titles and another for text, for example.
- Choose a text color that is high in contrast to the background color.
- Be consistent throughout the presentation.
- Limit the number of colors on a single slide.

**Limit effects** — Limit gratuitous effects. Use effects intentionally to draw attention to the content. Overuse of special effects such as builds, transitions, animation, and sounds can make your presentation too busy and ‘gimmicky’ and detract from your message.

- Text effects like WordArt can make the slide harder to read.
- Letters and words that fly on to the slide can be distracting and confusing.
- Only use builds when necessary to make your point because they can slow your presentation.

**Use solid color backgrounds behind text**.

**Use solid colors instead of patterns for filling in charts and tables**.

**Start with the built-in theme colors and then experiment on your own**.

**Select a background** — PowerPoint® offers many themes and background styles to choose from. As with fonts and colors, the goal is to enhance readability and effectively communicate your message.

- Keep the background consistent and subtle to enhance the readability of the text.
- Use contrasting colors for text and background.
- Use dark text on a light background for online learning and small screen viewing.
- Use light text on a dark background for large lecture halls and presentations on large screens.
- Be careful with patterned backgrounds that can reduce readability of text.
If you use builds, have content appear on the screen in a consistent, simple manner. Building from the top or left is best, and easier to track visually.

Avoid the use of flashy transitions.

Transition effects may seem impressive at first, but are distracting and get old quickly.

Limit the number of transitions used. If you use only one, the audience knows what to expect.

Use animation subtly — too much motion or sound effects can be distracting and take focus away from your message.

Add graphics and images — Make sure the graphics and images you choose relate to and enhance the content and meaning of the slide.
Limit the number of graphics or images on each slide.

Use quality clipart, but a little goes a long way.

Go beyond the stock clipart and images that came loaded on your computer by searching for images using Google Images.

Avoid flashy graphics unless they relate directly to the slide.

Keep graphs, charts, and diagrams simple.

Use bar graphs and pie charts instead of difficult to read tables of words and numbers.

Be careful when resizing graphics and images. Avoid stretching graphics disproportionately. Making pictures larger than they actually are causes them to be fuzzy.

Inform and engage — Use a single, provocative phrase, a meaningful quote, an eye-catching image, or a combination to draw the audience into your presentation. Let the visual message help convey your passion and emotion.

Please visit www.ChildCareExchange.com/free_resources to view some simple slides that I created about how to use PowerPoint® to illustrate these ideas.

Preventing 'Death by PowerPoint®'

PowerPoint® is fun to use and can help you create memorable presentations if you keep it simple and resist the temptation to use all the tools and options. Remember, just because it can be done doesn't mean you have to do it. Be intentional. Ask yourself if you need all this 'stuff' on the slide. Consider how best to visually support your message. Think about your content and audience and decide what to include and why.

PowerPoint® is fun and easy to use and has so many options, features, and effects that you can easily overload your presentations with too much of everything. It's up to you to prevent 'death by PowerPoint®' by eliminating the don'ts and focusing on the dos.

Give these tips a try the next time you present unto others.

Tech links

Here are some links to popular presentation graphics programs:

- Apple® Keynote
  www.apple.com/ios/keynote/

- Corel® Presentations™ X4
  www.corel.com/servlet/Satellite/us/en/Product/1207834997964#view=tab1

- Harvard Graphics® Pro Presentations
  www.harvardgraphics.com

- Lotus® Freelance Graphics
  Microsoft® PowerPoint®

- OpenOffice.org Impress
  www.openoffice.org/product/impress.html

PowerPoint® tips

Here are some fun and informative websites I visited while gathering information for this article:

- Death by PowerPoint® or Twelve Steps to Better E-Presentations
  www.marshall.edu/it/cit/

References