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Slides Are Not
Handouts

Slides Are Not Handouts, and Other New Rules for PowerPoint Presentations

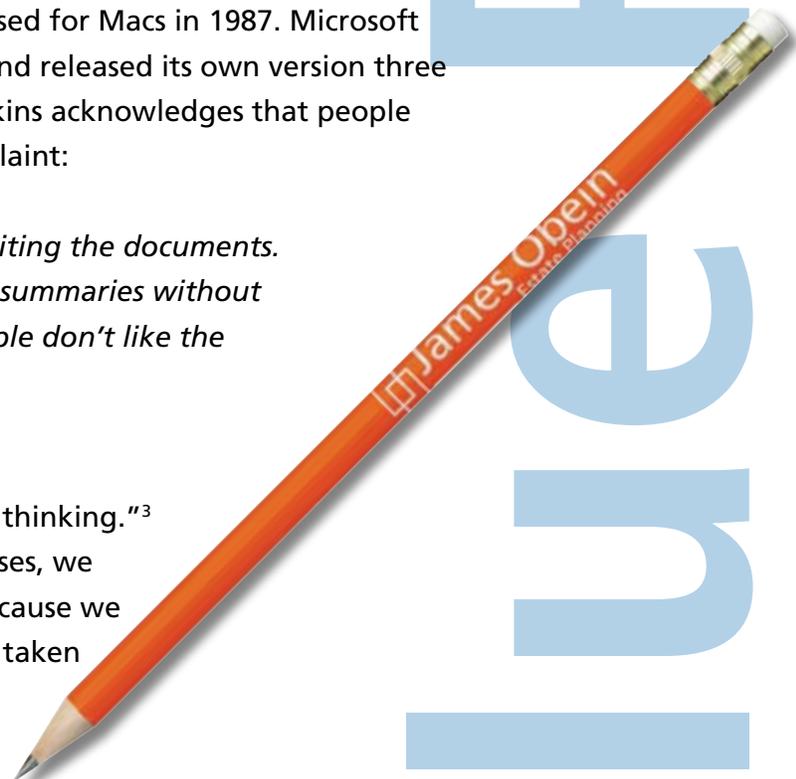
Okay, hold on tight. This might rock your world a bit. You know those conference handouts that are really just miniatures of the speaker's PowerPoint presentation? (Yeah, you know. You've done it. We've all done it.) Well, that is just so old school. It was fine when the software was in its infancy—when people were still learning how to use computers and fancy transitions, like screen wipes, and Star Wars-style sound effects made you the department hero. Those days are gone, and many of us are happy to see them go.

PowerPoint celebrated its 20th birthday this past summer, a milestone that gave rise to a number of articles maligning this software for dumbing down our presentations and forcing countless people to endure "Death by PowerPoint"—those mind-numbingly dull sessions in which some dry, unimaginative speaker stood in front of the room and read his slides to us. Oh, the humanity.

Even the software's original creators have complaints. Developed by Robert Gaskins and Dennis Austin, PowerPoint was originally released for Macs in 1987. Microsoft immediately bought the company for \$14 million and released its own version three years later.¹ Quoted in the Wall Street Journal, Gaskins acknowledges that people make poor use of the software. He gives this complaint:

"A lot of people in business have given up writing the documents. They just write the presentations, which are summaries without the detail, without the backup. A lot of people don't like the intellectual rigor of actually doing the work."²

Critics claim the software encourages "bullet-point thinking."³ By distilling our concepts down to a few short phrases, we deprive our audience of any real insight—either because we don't have room to fit it on the slide or we haven't taken the time to develop our thoughts in the first place.



¹ "As PowerPoint turns 20, Creators Ponder the Dark Side to Success." By Lee Gomes. Wall Street Journal. June 20, 2007. B1.

² Ibid.

³ "Don't Hate PowerPoint; Hate the PowerPointers." Stephen J. Dubner. Freakonomics.Blogs.NYTimes.com. Posted June 20, 2007. Visited Nov. 1, 2007.

Critics also complain that presenters use the software as a crutch. Instead of developing a strong presentation that can stand on its own, we rely on our slides to drive the presentation forward. Forget note cards or outlines...the slides will tell us what our next thought is going to be. Heck, we barely have to practice!

Don't Hate the Software

PowerPoint was intended to enhance the presentation, not be the presentation. Used effectively, PowerPoint can help you build powerful emotional connections with your audience, illustrate complicated concepts and increase information retention. Used inappropriately, the tool detracts from your presentation and even hinders audience understanding.

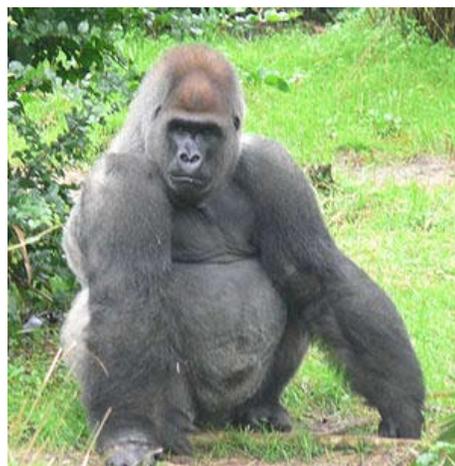
Is the software to blame? Not at all, says Freakonomics author Stephen Dubner, who blogs for the New York Times. He writes, *"Don't hate PowerPoint. Hate the PowerPointers."* That may be a little harsh, and even a little misguided. The software is, after all, packed with some cookie-cutter templates that are fairly atrocious by just about anyone's standards. And we mustn't overlook the AutoContent Wizard that outlines your presentation and provides key talking points for selected themes. There's even a template for communicating bad news. (Guidelines for slide seven encourage you to "Sympathize with the audience's situation if appropriate."⁴) Come on, Dubner. We think the software can take a little blame.



Ah, but now the innocence is over. You can't stop reading now and claim you were never told. We're telling you now. It's time to change your ways and your lingo:

Not PowerPoint, but Presentation Software:

Somewhere along the way, the term "PowerPoint" became synonymous for computer-generated slide presentations. It's like Kleenex® and tissues, Jacuzzi® and spas, Band-Aid® and adhesive bandages. Or rather, it used to be. Presentation software has proliferated, and PowerPoint is no longer the 800-pound gorilla. Mac's Keynote software is a formidable competitor, and OpenOffice Impress and Google's free online slide creator are weighing in as well.



⁴ Microsoft PowerPoint 2002.

Not PowerPoint Presentation, but Slide Deck:

“Slide deck” is the generic and preferred term for the slides in a PowerPoint presentation. Ask a colleague to send you her slide deck if you want to sound hip and current.

Okay, now that we have the language down, let’s talk about content and design.

Learning Styles and Implications

Presentations should appeal to multiple learning styles. There’s an old maxim that suggests we remember 20 percent of what we see, 30 percent of what we hear, 50 percent of what we hear and see, and 70 percent of what we do.⁵ More recent research suggests that individuals have different learning styles—some will learn best through auditory methods, others through visual cues, and others through kinesthetic methods or “doing.” When we use visuals in our presentations, we help auditory and visual learners absorb and retain our information.

Cognitive scientists have gone much further than these basic precepts and have made several discoveries that are particularly relevant to presentation software users. Garr Reynolds, a former corporate presenter for Apple and now the Presentation Zen blogger, outlines four key findings on human information processing⁶:



- **Multimedia Effect:** Narration with visuals is better than narration alone.

Okay, we get this. This is the “hear and see” principle.

- **Modality Principle:** People learn better when words are presented as narration rather than text.

This means that asking people to read your slide is not as effective as speaking the words yourself.

- **Redundancy Principle:** People learn better from narration and visuals rather than narration, visuals and text.

Good to know. Deliver too much information at once and people can’t process it all. Narration and visuals is the ideal. Cliff Atkinson, author of *Beyond Bullet Points*, cites research that says people understand better when words are presented as narration alone,

⁵ *Successful Presentation Skills*, p. 50.

⁶ *GarrReynolds.com Presentation Zen* *handout*. W

not as both narration and text⁷. So we must all solemnly resolve to stop reading our slides out loud.

- Coherence Principle: People learn better when extraneous visual material is excluded.

Ah, glorious white space. Resist the logos, unnecessary clip art, corny sound effects, and too many razzle-dazzle transitions. Integrate transitions into a few select slides. Garr recommends using only those effects you might expect to see on the evening news.

Incorporating kinesthetic or active learning is a challenge in presentations. It's a safe bet your clients don't want to draw a poster or create a skit to help them synthesize the information. However, you can incorporate interactive elements, such as audience participation and props, to aide retention. Many presenters like to toss giveaway items into the crowd to encourage participation, refocus the audience's attention or illustrate a specific point. Others provide takeaways for audience members to create a long-lasting impression. Use a logo imprint and a contact number, and you'll create lasting recognition for your presentation and your company.

Think of the key points you want to convey and identify a metaphor you could use for illustration. For example:

- [Globe Beach Balls](#) or [Globe Stress Balls](#) illustrate a worldwide network.
- [Jersey Joe Bender](#) suggests flexibility.
- [Happy Pig Bank](#) represents cost savings.
- [Red Pocket Duct Tape](#) references helping your client through bureaucracy.
- [Dice Stress Balls](#) denote the chances customers take when working with your competition.



Create a presentation that is focused on how people learn, not on how you prefer to present. Sure it's easy to plunk your thoughts down in bullet-point format and then walk people through your agenda, but that's not doing anyone any good. Presentation Dos and Don'ts

Okay, get ready for more tough love. Manipulating fonts and designing templates is not the best use of your time. Wall Street Journal writer Lee Gomes levied harsh criticism against PowerPoint do-it-yourselfers, describing them as "cubicle warriors who, in the guise of doing real work, spend endless hours fiddling with fonts." While a tad harsh, we do believe that just about everyone who has ever created a slide deck has gotten caught up in the bells and whistles and graphics—spending more time than was likely necessary.

⁷ *Beyond Bullet Points*. Cliff Atkinson. p. 47.

One school of thought suggests that companies develop one corporate-approved presentation template for everyone to use. This would be appropriate for more of the traditional bullet-heavy presentations, but it doesn't work with contemporary notes section of slide presentations. Today's presentations should be visually compelling—light on the text and heavy on the images. Remember, slides are meant to enhance your presentation, not be your presentation. Sketch a story board and outsource the graphics to your marketing department or a professional designer. You'll get a contemporary-looking presentation that will support—not detract from—the professional image you want to convey.

- Use One Idea Per Slide

No data dumping allowed! People learn better when information is broken into smaller digestible chunks.⁸ (Someone had to research that?) That means each slide should have only one main idea. Garr argues your slides should have so little text as to be meaningless without narration. For your own sake, record details in your software's notes section. You can view these notes on your laptop while you present, but the screen image remains simple and visual.

Of course, not everyone can see your presentation in person. So what do you do? Well, it has been common practice to e-mail slide decks. But based on the learning styles reviewed above (i.e., people learn better from narration than text), slide presentations cannot work well as both in-person and stand-alone presentations. If you put enough information on a slide to make it meaningful to a reader, you've negated its value in a visual presentation. Cliff Atkinson, author of the new business cult classic *Beyond Bullet Points*, recommends printing your notes section along with the slide and sending that instead. Garr argues that fully written documents, such as research papers and executive summaries, make the most appropriate handouts and slides shouldn't be distributed at all.



- Keep Your Message Legible

Audience members must be able to see all images and text. How many times have you been in a presentation where the speaker said, "You probably can't read this but ..."? That's a perfect example of a speaker who is using the software as a crutch—he or she wants the visual for reference. If your audience can't see it, don't put it on a slide. Include the chart in a handout if the information is that vital.

⁸ *Beyond Bullet Points*, p. 35

If you're using one clear idea per slide, you shouldn't need tiny fonts to cram in more detail. In *Say It With Charts*, visual communication expert Gene Zelazny provides a table that shows how large the font needs to be based on screen size and audience distance from the screen.⁹ The smallest font size he recommends is 16 points on a 6-foot screen with a maximum audience distance of 15 feet. If your screen is 8 feet wide and your audience is 40 feet away, font size should be no smaller than 22 points. He recommends up to a 32-point font for the largest rooms. Be sure your presentation can be seen. Use large fonts and few words, and you'll be safe.

- Use High-Quality Visuals

Graphics are essential. See Learning Styles/Multimedia Effect above: People learn better with visuals and narration. But, as Atkinson cautions, this only works if pictures illustrate your point rather than serve as distracting decoration. Clip art is overused and lacks any real style. Think stock photography instead. The Stock.XCHNG is one great source for free, quality photography. Use half-screen images or use full-screen images with or without text overlays.

See What We Mean

We realize this can be hard to visualize, so we located three examples for you. To understand what we're talking about, take a look at the [Sample Slides](#) on Garr Reynolds' site or check out this live marketing presentation from [Seth Godin](#). Scott Ginsberg, blogger, author and professional speaker, agrees that presentation software is for pictures, and claims each slide should have eight words or less.¹⁰ See one of [Ginsberg's slide decks](#). The idea is to interact with your slides. Use them to illustrate your presentation, not to carry all the weight.



General Presentation Tips

So your slide deck is ready to go. It's a sleek visual in which images are used selectively and words economically, and it will drive home your message in a manner that is certain to leave a lasting, positive impression.

⁹ *Say It With Charts*, p. 201

¹⁰ *HelloMyNamelsScott.Blogspot.com, January 31, 2007 post. Visited November 1, 2007.*

Here are a few final presentation tips:

- Speak to your audience, not the screen. Resist the temptation to look at the screen while you talk. Better to have a laptop in front of you with a copy of your presentation for reference.
- Use a remote. It's distracting for the audience if you have to travel back and hit your keyboard every time you want the screen to advance. Invest in a remote and walk around.
- Plan for audio. Use embedded audio/video clips only if you are certain you can plug into the conference center audio system or you can bring your own auxiliary speakers. Even in a small office board room, the speakers in your laptop are not loud enough to carry the sound.
- Be prepared to run solo. Technology doesn't always work. Be ready to give your presentation without visuals. If that happens, apologize once and move one. Don't force your audience to suffer through your frustration with you.
- Practice. For goodness sake, practice.

Whoever said a picture is worth a thousand words was right. Master these presentation tips and techniques, and you will lead your team in creating a fresh, smart presentation style that compels your audience to see your company as cutting edge.



Preparation