PowerPoint

Tool of the gods
Know your audience as well as possible

- Who is the audience?
- What is the purpose of the event?
- Why were you asked to speak?
- Where is it?
- When is it?

- How much background information about your topic can you assume they bring to the presentation?
- Do they want more concepts and theory rather than advice?
Limit bullet points and text in your PowerPoint presentation

• Your presentation is for the benefit of the audience. But boring an audience with bullet point after bullet point is of little benefit to them. Which brings us to the issue of text. The best slides may have no text at all. This may sound insane given the dependency of text slides today, 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. Many people often say something like this: "Sorry I missed your presentation. I hear it was great. Can you just send me your PowerPoint slides?" But if they are good slides, they will be of little use without you. Instead of a copy of your PowerPoint slides, it is far better to prepare a written document which highlights your content from the presentation and expands on that content. 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. 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. We’ll talk more about this in the delivery section below, but as long as we are talking about text, please remember to never, ever turn your back on the audience and read text from the slide word for word.
Create a written document.

• Put in as many footnotes or details as you like. Then, when you start your presentation, tell the audience that you’re going to give them all the details of your presentation after it’s over, and they don’t have to write down everything you say. Remember, the presentation is to make an emotional sale. The document is the proof that helps the intellectuals in your audience accept the idea that you’ve sold them on emotionally.
Show your passion

If I had only one tip to give, it would be to be passionate about your topic and let that enthusiasm come out. Yes, you need great content. Yes, you need professional, well designed visuals. But it is all for naught if you do not have a deep, heartfelt belief in your topic. The biggest item that separates mediocre presenters from world class ones is the ability to connect with an audience in an honest and exciting way. Don't hold back. Be confident. And let your passion for your topic come out for all to see.
Make slides that reinforce your words, not repeat them.

- Create slides that demonstrate, with emotional proof, that what you’re saying is true not just accurate.

Talking about pollution in Houston? Instead of giving me four bullet points of EPA data, why not read me the stats but show me a photo of a bunch of dead birds, some smog and even a diseased lung? This is cheating! It’s unfair! It works.
Content, content, content

- Knowledge
- Attitude
- Transformational
- Perspectives
- Self
- Structural

Writing

- Gather evidence
- Identify and challenge
- Use theory

Data
Observation
Research
Reflection

Assumptions
Theories
Experience

Synthesis
Analysis
Description
In Defense of PowerPointism

By Christopher Fahey

Microsoft's PowerPoint is frequently blamed for the poor quality of many presentations and for a supposedly disastrous state of communication in both the private and the public spheres. Public speakers are lambasted for their wooden stage presence, crippled by their over-reliance on projected slide shows and meaningless bullet-points. The slides themselves, too, are often ripe with design crimes ranging from clip-art diarrhea to impenetrable verbosity.

And because of the ubiquity of the tool and the technique, because public speakers from Al Gore to members of Australia's Parliament use slideshows to support their speeches, the software itself has become the de facto target of criticism. I don't think this is quite fair.

The Critics

The most outspoken critic of PowerPoint is Edward Tufte. In his essay "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint", Tufte makes the case that PowerPoint is inherently flawed because it provides a specific, severely limited vocabulary of communication methods, forcing our ideas to conform to a medium that does not lend itself to complex ideas. For Tufte, the tool itself is to blame.

George Orwell's classic essay "Politics and the English Language" gets right the interplay between quality of thought and cognitive style of presentation: The English language becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. Imagine Orwell writing about PP: "PowerPoint becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of PowerPoint makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts."

Tufte focuses on PowerPoint's many specific features like bullet pointing, slide templating, and gratuitous animations/transitions (especially insofar as PowerPoint essentially drives you to use these features whether you want to or not). But the basic concept of speaking and having pictures next to you is not undermined by any of his arguments. In fact, he aims much of his attack at the use of PowerPoint to create static documents for unaccompanied digital and paper distribution — few of his arguments discuss the use of PowerPoint in the context of a live presentation.

Another critical study, however, does address this aspect of PowerPoint usage. This study (full PDF paper here) alleges that even when used as part of a live presentation, PowerPoint does more harm than good because its typical usage mode — where the speaker simply reads, verbatim, the contents of each slide as they flip by — flies in the face of how the human brain works. The study's author, Professor John Sweller, claims that humans have a limit to their "cognitive load", and that information simultaneously presented both visually (as text) and aurally (as spoken words) adds up to less than the sum of their parts, and that the resulting communication and retention is actually worse than if the words, or the slides, were presented by themselves.

The exception, Sweller admits, is when the slides themselves illustrate something that is more effectively communicated as a picture, or when the slide contains words that instead of distracting from the verbal point being made actually helps sum it up in a way that allows the audience to better comprehend and retain the information. In short, slides should underline, not undermine.

It's Not All Bad

I agree with the point-by-point granular arguments of both of these critics, but I take issue with their shared top-level summary contention that PowerPoint hurts effective communication. When Tufte and Sweller argue, in short, that we should throw PowerPoint away, I wonder if they aren't throwing the baby out with the bath water.

First, I wonder if the majority of the world's crappy presentations wouldn't be just as bad, or even a hell of a lot worse, if the presenter didn't have the slides to use as a crutch. Tufte himself wonders if PowerPoint's stupidity isn't because PowerPoint is a "stupidity magnet", attracting stupid people to its all-too-easy toolkit. Of course, smart people use PowerPoint all the time, but perhaps these people are simply terrible communicators regardless of PowerPoint, and they would do just as poorly with any other communication tool, or with no tools at all.

I think that blaming PowerPoint or Keynote conflates the technology with the concept of the multimedia presentation. Neither of these two critiques succeeds in discrediting the basic concept that images can help make a spoken presentation a hell of a lot better, by illustrating concepts, summing up key facts, or providing entertainment. And neither argument adequately addresses the obvious application where the visual imagery is, in fact, central to the presentation, such as when discussing a design portfolio, an information graphic, or a battlefield map.
Bonus

• What other problems exist?
PowerPoint
Can it be better?
Transformational Learning

Knowledge, attitude, transformational perspectives, Self, structural

Gather evidence, Identify and challenge, Use theory
- data, observation, research, reflection

Assumptions, theories, experience

Synthesis, Analysis, Description

Writing
Free is different
• Only 3 bullet points
• 5 words each
• 30 point font
No more than six words
One idea per slide
Simplicity
Build with simple elements
Emotion
Passion
Long quotes from:

- Garr Reynolds
- Seth Godin
- Christopher Fahey

Links at:
kalamazooodesign.blogspot.com
photos and slideshow
by Chuck Stull
Kalamazoo College