

Presentation Zen

How to Design & Deliver Presentations Like a Pro

By Garr Reynolds
(info@garrreynolds.com)

This brief handout, highlights many of the key points made in my recent presentations and seminars on presentation design. You will also find a bibliography of suggested readings and links to websites referred to in the presentations.

Zen and effective presentations

In the presentation, we discussed the current state of business presentations today which, more often than not, incorporate the use of PowerPoint in ways that actually undermine the speaker's good intentions. Bullet-point filled slides with reams of text become a barrier to good communication. We have become accustomed to a "PowerPoint culture" in which a disconnect exists between the audience and the presenter. Many people, including many top business leaders, are fed up with PowerPoint. But it is not PowerPoint's fault — PowerPoint is just a tool.

"Technical knowledge is not enough. One must transcend techniques so that the art becomes an artless art, growing out of the unconscious."

— Daisetsu Suzuki

If we apply some basic, accessible concepts borrowed from the world of Zen, we can improve our effectiveness and allow our content to connect in more powerful ways. One key concept is simplicity. However, simplicity is not merely a means to more effective communication. Rather, it is a consequence of our "Letting Go" of bad habits and much of what we have learned about multimedia presentations in the era of PowerPoint. Other important concepts include: The beginner's mind; Being fully in the moment; Moderation, or "the middle way;" Minimization of chaos and clutter.

"Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity."

— Charles Mingus

In a nut shell: PowerPoint culture causes both audiences and presenters to suffer. And content suffers too. The root of the suffering is attachment to old PowerPoint habits and misunderstandings about how best to connect to an audience. Lose your attachment to the "normal" way PowerPoint is used and lose poor presentation habits to move to a higher level of effectiveness.

Effective use of multimedia

When designing our presentations and creating the supporting visual aids, we should keep in mind the way our audience will actually process our presentation. We must design our visuals and use PowerPoint in ways that take advantage of how people process information. Much can be learned, then, from a review of the key findings in the field of cognitive science concerning how people learn best in multimedia presentation settings. Below, cognitive scientist, Dr. Richard Mayer, summarizes the three assumptions of multimedia learning theory.

"Cognitive scientists have discovered three important features of the human information processing system that are particularly relevant for PowerPoint users: **dual-channels**, that is, people have separate information processing channels for visual material and verbal material; **limited capacity**, that is, people can pay attention to only a few pieces of information in each channel at a time; and **active processing**, that is, people understand the presented material when they pay attention to the relevant material, organize it into a coherent mental structure, and integrate it with their prior knowledge."

— Rich Mayer, in an interview with Sociable Media, Inc.

(1) Review of Key Findings

- *Multimedia Effect*. Narration with pictures (visuals) is better than narration alone.
- *Modality Principle*. People learn better when words are presented as narration rather than text.
- *Redundancy Principle*. People learn better from narration & graphics rather than narration, graphics, & text.
- *Coherence Principle*. People learn better when extraneous visual material is excluded.

(2) Practical Implications for better PowerPoint Presentations

- Presentations must be both verbal & visual.
- Too much slide information overloads people's cognitive systems.
- Can your visuals be understood in 3 seconds? If not, redesign them to *support* your talk.
- Slide design & delivery must *help* people organize, integrate information.

Organization & Preparation Tips

PowerPoint is not inherently a bad tool. In fact, if presenters just avoid a few of the most common PowerPoint pitfalls, their presentations will greatly improve. Below, many of the items discussed in the presentation are highlighted in brief.

(1) Start with the end in mind. Before you even open up PowerPoint, sit down and really think about the day of your presentation. What is the real purpose of your talk? What does the audience expect? In your opinion, what are the most important parts of your topic for the audience to take away from your, say, 50-minute presentation? Remember, even if you've been asked to share information, rarely is the mere transfer of information a satisfactory objective from the point of view of the audience. After all, the audience could always just read your book (or article, handout, etc.) if information transfer were the only purpose of the meeting, seminar, or formal presentation.

(2) Plan in “analog mode.” That is, rather than diving right into PowerPoint (or Keynote), the best presenters often scratch out their ideas and objectives with a pen and paper. Personally, I use a large whiteboard in my office to sketch out my ideas (when I was at Apple, I had one entire wall turned into a whiteboard!). The whiteboard works for me as I feel uninhibited and free to be creative. I can also step back (literally) from what I have sketched out and imagine how it might flow logically when PowerPoint is added later. Also, as I write down key points and assemble an outline and structure, I can draw quick ideas for visuals such as charts or photos that will later appear in the PowerPoint. Though you may be using digital technology when you deliver your presentation, the act of speaking and connecting to an audience — to persuade, sell, or inform — is very much analog.

(3) Good presentations include stories. The best presenters illustrate their points with the use of stories, most often personal ones. The easiest way to explain complicated ideas is through examples or by sharing a story that underscores the point. Stories are easy to remember for your audience. If you want your audience to remember your content, then find a way to make it relevant and memorable to them. You should try to come up with good, short, interesting stories or examples to support your major points.

(4) It's all about our audience. There are three components involved in a presentation: the audience, you, and the medium (in our case, PowerPoint). The goal is to create a kind of harmony among the three. But above all, the presentation is for the benefit of the audience. However, boring an audience with bullet point after bullet point is of little benefit to them. Which brings us to point number five, perhaps the most important of all.

**“Respect those who come to you with open ears
and foster a sense of community.”**

— P.T. Sudo

(5) Reduce the text on your slides to an absolute minimum. 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 supposed to support/supplement the narration of the speaker, not make the speaker superfluous. Yes, it is true that many people often say something like this: "Sorry I missed your presentation, Steve. I hear it was great. Can you just send me your PowerPoint slides?" Well, you could. But if they are good slides, they may be of little use without you.

(6) Do not read the text word for word off the slide. Audiences can read, so why do presenters insist on reading long lines of text from slides? Also, it is very difficult — if not impossible — to read a slide and listen to someone talk at the same time. So again, why all the text on slides these days? One reason may be that it is convenient for the speaker when organizing the presentation to write out his/her thoughts one bullet point at a time. But as Yale professor and visual communications specialist, Edward Tufte points out in a September Wired Magazine article "...convenience for the speaker can be punishing to both content and audience." Speakers also may be thinking that their wordy slides will make for better handouts, a common "handout" technique. However, the confining, horizontal orientation of a slide (one slide after another) makes for difficult writing and reading. Which brings us to the next point below.

(7) Written documents (research papers, handouts, executive summaries, etc.) are for the expanded details. Audiences will be 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.

Remember: (1) your slides should contain only a minimum of information; (2) your slide notes, which only you see, will contain far more data; and (3) your handout will have still far more data and detail.

Slide (PowerPoint) Tips

(1) Keep it simple. PowerPoint 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 "star of the show." People came to hear you and be moved or informed (or both) 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, busy, or full of what Edward Tufte calls "chart junk." 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.

Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.

— Leonardo da Vinci

(2) Avoid using Microsoft templates. Most of the templates included in PowerPoint have already been seen by your audience countless times (and besides, the templates are not all that great to begin with). You can make your own background templates which will be more tailored to your needs or you can purchase professional templates on-line (for example: www.powerpointtemplatespro.com).

(3) 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 1992, 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 carefully and judiciously.

(4) 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 (be cautious of copyright issues, however). Never simply stretch a small, low resolution photo to make it fit your layout — doing so will degrade the resolution even further.

(5) Use object builds and slide transitions judiciously. 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).

(6) Synchronize your speaking with the builds and transitions. In other words, show the next item (new slide or new build) at the same time you begin talking about it. This requires practice, but it takes only a short time to get the hang of it. Watch the evening news on TV and you'll notice that bullet points and graphics appear at the same time or just after the reporter speaks on the particular item.

(7) Use video and audio when appropriate. You can use video clips within PowerPoint without ever leaving the application or turning 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 superfluous sound effects attached to animations is a sure way to lose credibility with your audience.

(8) Limit your ideas to one main idea per slide. If you have a complicated slide with lots of different data, it may be better to break it up into 2-3 different slides (assuming no side-by-side comparisons are needed).

Delivery Tips

(1) Move away from the podium — connect with your audience. If at all possible get closer to your audience by moving away from or in front of the podium.

(2) Remember the “B” key. If you press the “B” key while your PowerPoint slide is showing, the screen will go blank. This is useful if you need to digress or move off the topic presented on the slide. By having the slide blank, all the attention can now be placed back on you. When you are ready to move on, just press the “B” key again and the image reappears. (The “.” key does the same thing).

(3) Use a remote-control device to advance your slides and builds. A handheld remote will allow you to move away from the podium. This is an absolute must. (<http://www.keyspan.com/products/>).

(4) Make good eye contact. Try looking at individuals rather than scanning the group. Since you are using a computer, you never need to look at the screen behind you — just glance down at the computer screen briefly. One sure way to lose an audience is to turn your back on them.

Perfect adequacy (non-attachment) teaches us to transcend ourselves so that we may respond to the inner requirements of those around us.

— Robert Linssen

(5) Take it slowly. When we are nervous we tend to talk too fast. Get a videotape of one of your presentations to see how you did — you may be surprised at the pace of your talk.

(6) Keep the lights on. If you are speaking in a meeting room or a classroom, the temptation is to turn the lights off so that the slides look better. But go for a compromise between a bright screen image and ambient room lighting. Turning the lights off — besides inducing sleep — puts all the focus on the screen. The audience should be looking at you more than the screen. Today's projectors are bright enough to allow you to keep many of the lights on. If you are presenting to a small group, then you can connect your computer to a large TV (via the s-video line-in). With a TV screen, you can keep all or most of the lights on.

Suggested readings

Presentations

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

by Cliff Atkinson
Microsoft press

The Short Road to Great Presentations

by Peter Reimold & Cheryl Reimold
IEEE Press

Looking Good in Presentations, Third Edition

by Molly W. Joss, Roger C. Parker
The Coriolis Group

Presentations That Get Results: 14 Reasons Yours May Not

by Marian K. Woodall
Professional Business Communications

Design/Visual Communication

Multimedia Learning

by Richard Mayer
Cambridge University Press

The Elements of Graphic Design

by Alexander White
Allworth Press

7 Essentials of Graphic Design

by Allison Goodman
HowDesignBooks

ZEN

The Zen of Creativity : Cultivating Your Artistic Life

by JOHN DAIDO LOORI
Ballantine Books

Websites

www.garrreynolds.com
www.sociablemedia.com
www.edwardtufte.com
www.presentersuniversity.com
www.presentationcoach.com

Contact Information for Garr Reynolds

Email: info@garrreynolds.com
Web: www.garrreynolds.com

Sample slides on last page.

