

# DEATH BY POWERPOINT

PowerPoint (and other presentation software such as Keynote) can be a useful tool to support presentations when used appropriately. It allows you to make great use of visual aids and multimedia and can help both the presenter and audience stay organized. There are, however, dangers when it is used carelessly: it can be very dense and boring, and it can control and encourage passiveness in both the audience and presenter, and it can lead to the demise of an important presentation (i.e., yours.) So, what is appropriate use? How does one avoid death by PowerPoint? Below are three principles that can help.

## 1. PowerPoint is not a teleprompter

Don't use dense text in your slides. In his book *Presentation Zen*, Garr Reynolds (2008) describes the "slideument," or a PowerPoint slideshow with all the text from a document pasted into dense bullet points. Slideuments provide very weak visual support for a presentation, and they serve poorly as a way to read a text. Forego all use of paragraphs, avoid sentences and limit text to a few words that help keep you and your audience organized. Also, don't read your slides; a presentation is not a reading event for you or for your audience. Instead, talk about the images and concepts you show or illustrate. Research from the University of New South Wales (Sweller, 2007) indicates that it is more difficult to process information if it presented verbally and visually at the same time; reading a list of bullet points actually damages your audience's ability to learn.

There are three places text and visual info can go in your presentation: on screen, in your notes, and in a handout. Keep these three things separate. The slides the audience sees should be very text-light, as described above; your notes can contain a text outline of what you hope to cover, and a handout (like this one!) can be dense with text and detailed info. If you keep these media mentally separate as you create your presentation materials, your PowerPoint slides will likely be cryptic without the context of the actual presentation, but your handout will be able to stand alone. Keep them separate!

## 2. PowerPoint should not be in control

In addition to the issues described above, reading bullet points causes the presenter to cede control to the software and march along, lock step, to the next bullet point. Moving towards a less linear, less rigid structure will help make a presentation feel more conversational; a narrative story is interesting, a bulleted list read aloud is not. Ideally, YOU should be in control of the sequence and the content, and you should be able to adapt on the fly to your audience and setting. There are a few simple ways to move in this direction:

- **The B key** During a presentation, this key will black the screen out, allowing you and your audience to temporarily leave PowerPoint and interact in other ways. Use liberally!
- **Control K** While editing a PowerPoint show, you can select any object, picture or text, and with ctrl + K, you can add a hyperlink to another slide in the presentation, to another presentation, to different kind of file or to a website. You do not have to be linear—use hyperlinks to keep multiple paths available.
- **Keep the lights on and actively involve your audience.** Fixed rows of silent people all facing forward in the dark encourages passiveness. Include brief, alternate activities during a presentation that allow your audience to interact with the content, each other and/or you.

### 3. Relevant images & multimedia are good

PowerPoint's greatest strength is its ability to support presentations with visual aids. In particular, you can make use of relevant, data-rich pictures to illustrate your presentation. This is not suggestion to decorate, but to present high resolution data that support and complement your conversation with an audience. Research in multimedia learning (Mayer, 2001) indicates that the use of relevant images in PowerPoint facilitates learning as part of a strategy to offer cognitive guidance in a presentation, as opposed to simply presenting info and assuming the audience will "get it."

Where can you get images? You have a digital camera (or someone you know does.) Use it! You can also find a wealth of images with Creative Commons licenses for free at <http://www.flickr.com>. You can also find very high quality, low cost images at <http://www.istockphoto.com>. Have a look at some of the online examples listed below to see images in action. In any case, with minimal effort, you can find relevant, good quality images to support and illustrate your presentation.

When you place images on slides make them fill the entire screen; your background does not contain any relevant data, the image is what you want to use. This is a way of increasing what Edward Tufte (1983) calls your "data to ink ratio," though in this case, it really a data to pixel ratio. After all your pictures are in your PowerPoint show, be sure to right click on one of them and do this:

*format picture > compress > all pictures in document & web/screen*

Your file size will be significantly reduced (this is a good thing.) Finally, be sure to give credit for images that you have used, and consider attaching a [Creative Commons](#) license to your work so that others are able to build on what you have done.

#### Online resources

[TED Talks](#)

[Presentation Zen Blog](#)

[iStockphoto](#)

[Alexei Kapterev "Death By PPT"](#)

PowerPoint Makeover: [Science](#)

PowerPoint Makeover: [Humanities](#)

[Richard Mayer](#)

[Ditch How You Use PowerPoint](#)

#### References

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Sweller, J. (2007) Visualization and Instructional Design. Retrieved April 4, 2008 from <http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/trynew/sweller-visualinstructionaldesign.pdf>

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Tufte, E. (2003). *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint, 2nd Edition*, Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press. ISBN-13: 9780961392161

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Duke University Center for Instructional Technology .

Hugh Crumley [crumley@duke.edu](mailto:crumley@duke.edu)