

10 Key Steps To Using PowerPoint Better

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A certain little software program has become de rigueur for seemingly all presentations, even those not performed for, or in, a business setting: Microsoft® PowerPoint. We've all been there, either as a participant or as a presenter, and certainly have our complaints regarding some of those presentations. If you could go through it all again, what would you do differently (not attending or presenting is *not* an option)?

Below is a list of *suggestions* that may very well provide a better experience for you, should you be called to make a presentation and PowerPoint® is the software available to you. These are not the be-all to end-all, but experience is a wonderful teacher and any little bit can help. Just remember, the first rule is to **Know Your Audience**.

1. Compliment

- Each slide should *compliment* your spoken point, not reiterate it. The audience will merely follow along on your handout and not pay you any attention (or, perhaps even read ahead of your presentation, finish it, then pick up their BlackBerry® or cell phone and shut you out completely).

2. Slide Template

- If you are not bound by company standards, enjoy your freedom to choose your master slide pattern. Don't settle for the first few templates that PowerPoint provides, dig deeper. Think of your topic and what scheme will *compliment* it (also keeping in mind your audience when selecting color, style, etc.). When you find a template you like, know that the color schemes may be altered to suit your needs. The Internet also provides a plethora of PowerPoint templates designed by others (as well as new template additions on the Microsoft website).

3. Background

- Background color is very important; darker colors with light typeface can be easier for your audience to read, especially in a larger room (and remember, people tend to fill the back rows first, unless they have no choice because the presentation is in a conference room). But again, keep in mind the suitability of your chosen colors. Hot pink typeface on a dark blue background may be visually easy on the eye, but not exactly appropriate for presentations in most settings.

4. Size Does Matter

- Typeface size is very important. It should be **no smaller** than 24 point (and only if necessary). Ideally, it should be 28-32 point, which is standard (for a reason!). This is especially true for bullet points.

5. 28 With a Bullet

- Limit bullet points to five per slide, with an absolute maximum of seven. The more bullets, the smaller the typeface is compelled to be and the more difficult it is to read (especially on your handout).

6. Less is More

- The type of type is very important. Unless you are held to a company style guide standard, limit the typefaces you use to two (not including any company logo or other style guide inclusions). **Sans Serif** is good for titles, as it draws attention to the word or idea. **Serif** is good for regular text, as it draws attention to the context and meaning of the verbiage. However, make certain that there is not too much contrast between the typefaces, that they compliment one another and suit the nature of your content.

7. Break It Up

- Now and again, your audience needs a break, a visual break. Don't have bullet points filling up every slide; mix it up with a block of text. However, keep the text box small (this is where the 32 pt typeface comes in handy), but no smaller than 28 point, and try to offset it for visual interest:

Pri quot tota blandit ea, vim brute mazim euismod et, eu eos putant equidem inimicus. Falli omittantur ea nec, ea discere convenire similique sea, vix ne viris dolor audire. Mea audiam conceptam cu, ut ubique intellegat efficiantur sea, est ei fastidii phaedrum.

8. Pictures Are Worth...

- A thousand words (or a thousand groans, made silently of course). Graphics, photos, diagrams, charts, et al. are another great way to break it up every few slides and to enhance your point; a visual vacation for your audience. But please, *don't* use those standard clipart stick figures, nor any of the other cartoon-ish clipart that Microsoft provides. They are ugly, over-used, and enhance nothing. Take your own photos of objects or items that relate to the slide's main point. There are also sources for free stock photos on the Internet. Just remember, think of your audience first; will the graphic make sense to *them*?

9. Transitions

- Using those flashy "transitions" does your presentation a grave disservice. After an initial internal groan, your audience will soon point and laugh as the next bullet point comes in for a landing after a crazy-8 loopy-loop. Or, when the next slide title reveals itself in a checkerboard pattern. Revealing graphics with a camera shutter transition screams *amateur*. What transitions *can* add to your show is to reinforce a series of events to be performed or noted in a particular order, or if individual item emphasis is beneficial. A bullet slowly sliding in from the left or right, or appearing one at a time, can show emphasis on that particular point, and only that point, until you deem it time to expose the next bullet. Another available transition option is to highlight/gray-out certain pieces of a document, photo, chart, graphic, etc., then pull it out and enlarge it for emphasis, before sending it back.

10. Sound

- Unless it's absolutely necessary for your audience to hear a .wav clip, or other bit of audio, **turn it off**. As stated in number 9 above, transitions can be useful, but their accompanying sound effects lend nothing to your presentation, and there is no guarantee everyone will be able to hear them. The only sound that should be heard is *your voice*, captivating the audience all.

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One last thing: There is much debate on both sides of the issue of whether it is better to provide handouts before your presentation, or after. As mentioned in suggestion number 1, each slide should compliment your spoken point, not reiterate it. If you provide handouts that are nothing more than your entire presentation, verbatim, printed out, then certainly, provide it after your presentation. Just keep in mind it may not always be practical to do so, especially if there are other presenters immediately following you. However, if you follow the suggestion in number 1, then providing your audience with handouts that allow for taking notes that augment your spoken word and slide will do you justice and keep the attention of the audience focused on *you*.

Don't be intimidated. Just recollect presentations in which you have taken part. What pleased you? What annoyed you? Remember that and create your presentation to be something *you* would not mind attending in a large, dark (or semi-dark) auditorium for an extended period of time. Using these tips can help you accomplish that.

And don't forget the most important question: "**Who is My Audience?**"