

# Visual Communication: PowerPoint

## Common PowerPoint Mistakes

Russ Wills

Previous essays have set a context for more practical considerations regarding visual communication. Every detail communicates something, intentional or not. The way we use PowerPoint is no exception. PowerPoint has the potential to be an extremely powerful tool, especially to the image-driven audience this series of essays has been discussing. In spite of the potential for PowerPoint, the way the software is designed often leads to very ineffective presentations. (This, by the way, is also true of Keynote and most similar presentation software.) This essay will point out some very common mistakes people make when using PowerPoint during presentations.

### Mistake Number 1: Using Text

By default, a new PowerPoint document tempts the slideshow creator to create text based slides, usually in the form of bullet points or outlines. As I mentioned in the past, studies show that a text-based slideshow actually *lowers* retention. According to this research, a presenter is better off not using a slideshow than using a text-based slideshow.

The same studies show that using images to communicate while simultaneously speaking verbally will raise retention and understanding. The verbal side of the brain understands what the lecturer says. The visual side of the brain interprets the image. These two sides of the brain are understanding the same message, resulting in stronger comprehension of the subject.

### Mistake Number 2: Reading Your Slides

Directly related to creating slideshows containing only text (clipart does not count!), many presenters will read the text on the slides to the audience. Not only does this lower retention, as mentioned in number 1, but this also insults the intelligence of the audience. Many of the people in the audience will have already read the text before the speaker reads it out loud to them. This, by the way, implies that the audience was reading the text *instead of* listening to the speaker.

The message that is sent by reading the text on the slides to the audience is that the presenter's job is to merely convey the information from the slideshow to the audience. The ideas in the presentation worth remembering are in the slideshow. The important part of the lecture is being done by PowerPoint; the lecturer is merely there to point the audience to the slideshow.

PowerPoint should *never* give the presentation instead of the lecturer! PowerPoint should supplement the presentation; PowerPoint should not *be* the presentation.

---

## **Mistake Number 3: Turning your back on the audience**

This next mistake is an extension of number 2. Presenters who use large amounts of text in a slideshow are often tempted to face the screen in order to read the text out loud to the audience. This far surpasses insulting the audience's intelligence. Instead, turning your back on the audience completely loses any connection with the audience that had been developed. Turning your back to the audience to read a slide is essentially handing the presentation over to the computer. At that point the lecturer may as well create an automated slideshow and leave the stage.

## **Mistake Number 4: Starting the slideshow in front of the audience**

Starting a slideshow in front of an audience is not a big deal in an informal setting. For a formal, professional lecture, however, forcing the audience to watch the presenter turn on the projector and watch it warm up, then see the Windows or Mac interface, watch the presenter find and open the file all communicate "I'm not ready yet." In other words, "I'm not prepared." Even if everything is up and running, the audience should not have to see the PowerPoint application with all the thumbnails ready to go. Either begin the slideshow with an appropriate visual before the audience arrives, or begin the slideshow with a blank screen. Either way, when the presentation begins, the lecturer has the focus, not the computer.

## **Mistake Number 5: "Click to exit"**

For some strange reason, Microsoft has decided that at the end of a slideshow it is important to announce to the world that the slideshow has ended and that the lecturer can now click to exit the slideshow. Imagine you have just done the perfect presentation. You used PowerPoint to strategically show images that reinforced your point. You are just about to wrap everything up with a life-changing conclusion. You don't want your last slide displayed to distract, so you advance the slideshow. Just as you give your life-changing conclusion, the audience sees the message, "End of slideshow, click to exit." Your words are not lost. The audience saw that the slideshow is over. This means the lecture is over. People begin shuffling, grabbing their belongings, and preparing to leave.

Do not let PowerPoint tell your audience you are finished. Fixing this problem is simple. Just place an empty black slide at the end of your slideshow. Instead of getting PowerPoint's ever so helpful message, the screen will merely go black, leaving you as the sole focal point.

## **Mistake Number 6: Transitions**

Again, keep in mind that every detail communicates something. You have created a slideshow that uses images to communicate your material. You are ready to communicate one of the most important points in your message. People are hanging on your every word. As you begin to

reveal the idea that will cause the audience to change their lives and purchase all your books, you advance to the next slide to reinforce your idea with another image. The previous image explodes into a hundred pieces and is replaced by a new image, swirling onto the screen from the side and bouncing into place. You finish making your point, but nobody heard it. The audience was too busy trying to figure out why the old photo exploded and what metaphor you are trying to make by bouncing the new photo up and down.

At best, transitions tend to communicate, “Hey! Look at all the cool things my computer can do!” At worst, they subtly communicate a message that conflicts with what the presentation is actually about. Unless there is a strong visual reason to use a flashy transition, don’t. Use a simple, subtle transition that fades smoothly from one screen to the next, or avoid them altogether. A subtle, smooth transition does not grab the viewer’s attention as powerfully. It is far less distracting than the other transitions. An exception would be during a presentation on, say, racing or the speed of light. In that case, using no transition would likely be better, as the screen will flash immediately from one slide to the next, communicating the idea of speed.

## **Mistake Number 7: Templates**

Templates can be very useful in some ways. The arrangement of the templates is generally safe, with color combinations that work together and the elements of the page laid out nicely. This is useful for people who do not have design skills.

However, this advantage is also a disadvantage. Templates usually tell you where to put your *text*. Templates are generally not good for image-driven slideshows. Even if a slideshow is created with only images and no text, the background colors and design elements will usually conflict with most images. In addition, the design elements in packaged templates rarely communicate the main idea of the presentation.

For slideshows that use primarily images, a series of blank slides with black backgrounds is often fine. Using a black background means that no light comes out of the projector onto the background. The only light coming from the projector forms the image itself. The audience will see the image with nothing else to distract from or conflict with the image. For slides containing captions or other small uses of text, be sure that the colors, shapes, lines, textures, and other design elements all work together to communicate the main topic. Never let PowerPoint accidentally communicate anything other than the intended message.

## **Conclusion**

PowerPoint can be a powerful tool for supplementing verbal presentations with visual messages. As a presenter, never allow PowerPoint to take over the message. Be sure that every detail of the slideshow communicates the intended message. Remove *everything* that detracts from that message, including template elements, transitions, colors, fonts, even the computer and the projector itself. Be sure that PowerPoint serves you, and not the other way around.