How to avoid “Death by PowerPoint”

PowerPoint is not a tool for document creation. Many people make the mistake of using PowerPoint to write down all the facts, all the statistics, all the pieces of information that they have ever learnt about a topic and that they feel the audience must have in front of them or they will never understand what they are being told.

Human beings – as talented as they are – cannot read and listen to someone at the same time, especially when the slides being projected have 12-point text that is illegible for anyone further away than the front row.

The first step to creating and designing great presentations is to be mindful of the current state of what passes for “normal” PowerPoint presentations and that what is “normal” today is out of sync and off-kilter with how people actually learn and communicate.

If we desire to communicate with more clarity, integrity, beauty, and intelligence, then we must move beyond what is considered to be “normal” to something different and far more effective.

The principles to be most mindful of through every step of the presentation process are restraint, simplicity, and naturalness:

- **Simplicity** in design.
- **Naturalness** in delivery.
What makes a BAD presentation?

Lack of Preparation
A fundamental mistake people make is spending almost the entire time thinking about their talk and preparing their content while sitting in front of a computer screen. Before you design your presentation, you need to see the big picture and identify your core messages—or the single core message.

Planning is best done in analogue mode – with a pen and paper, whiteboards, or my favourite – sticky notes on wall, written on with a sharpie so that ideas don't get too complicated or too wordy. Sticky notes also have the advantage of allowing you to reorganise, add or delete content and easily organise the flow of your message.

Disorganisation
As well as being physically disorganised, forgetting the data projector, not knowing how to hook up your laptop, forgetting speakers when you need sound. There is also a whole range of questions that should be asked before a presentation is to occur. These include but are not limited to:

- How much time do I have?
- What's the venue like?
- What time of the day?
- Who is the audience?
- What's their background?
- What do they expect of me (us)?
- Why was I asked to speak?
- What do I want them to do?
- What visual medium is most appropriate for this particular situation and audience?
- What is the fundamental purpose of my talk?
- What's the story here?
- And the most fundamental question of all. Stripped down to its essential core: **What is my absolutely central point?** If the audience could remember only one thing (and you'll be lucky if they do), what do you want it to be?

Boring Content
Quite often, the content you are presenting is close to your heart. You believe in it, you think that it is important – but does your audience? Your job is to convince them and if you rattle off thousands of statistics, facts, quotes from government reports etc. etc. etc. you will bore the pants off them – and this is rarely a good thing.

Why it should matter seems obvious, too obvious to make explicit. Yet, that is what people (including most audiences) are hoping and praying that you’ll tell them. “Why should we care?” Put yourself in the audiences’ shoes and structure your content to suit them – not you.
Too much information

The final mistake of a presentation’s structure is in the presenter including too much information. There are no hard and fast rules about this one – no magic number of slides or the perfect timing for a presentation. As with the previous point, think of your audience, how much do they really need to know. After you have created your presentation – go back and edit like crazy. Take out all unnecessary items.

The Presenter

The presenter has more impact on the audience than the slides, the graphics, the animations but we spend almost no time working on ourselves and hours on the other factors.

When you get up to present, you need to have enough respect for your audience to not mumble into your notes, don’t shout to make yourself heard and try to inject some life, emotion and character into your voice. One of the best tools that comedy sitcoms use to make a character appear boring, unlikeable and socially awkward is to make them monotonous.

Being disorganised, shuffling papers, stopping midsentence to turn the page – these are all good opportunities for your audience to stop listening and start to do something else. Unfortunately, you probably won’t notice because you are staring at the page in front of you – not at them!

You have to look at the audience, not necessarily directly at them but at least in their general direction. Have your notes in front of you but be confident that you know them – ideally you will know them well enough that if you had to massively cut your presentation short, the projector dies, you have to present earlier than expected – none of these things should faze you. So absolutely have your notes, but don’t read from them – refer to them.

The presentation itself

Too many animations and transitions - if you require your content to come whizzing in from different directions, changing shape before zooming off again in another direction – your message must be lacking. Either that or you are trying to impress the audience with your PowerPoint knowledge, not your knowledge of the topic you are presenting on.

Animations are useful when they slow down the presentation of information – allowing the presenter to pace the delivery. Anything else and they are distractions only.

Images in presentations are there to enhance and leave behind with your audience a visual to call to mind when they need to remember a point you made. When you put up a slide it should trigger an emotional reaction in the audience. They should sit up and want to know what you’re going to say that fits in with that image.

Then, if you do it right, every time they think of what you said, they’ll see the image (and vice versa).
For me Nancy Duarte CEO of Duarte Design, the world's leading presentation design firm says it best - If you feel tempted to use a picture of two hands shaking in front of a globe, put the pencil down, step away from the desk, and think about taking a vacation or investigating aromatherapy.

**What makes a GOOD presentation?**

1. Interesting content that has been tailored for a specific audience
2. Clear and simple organisation that uses few (if any) bullet points
3. Visuals that relevant to the content and animations that enhance the message
4. A practiced performance that includes humour where possible (and if appropriate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Shortcut</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Run the next animation or advance to the next slide</td>
<td>Enter or Spacebar (or click the mouse)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return to the previous slide</td>
<td>Backspace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jump to a particular slide</td>
<td>Type the slide number and press Enter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jump to the first slide</td>
<td>Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jump to the last slide</td>
<td>End</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go to a black screen or resume slide show from a black screen</td>
<td>B (or period)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go to a white screen or resume slide show from a white screen</td>
<td>W (or comma)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End a slide show</td>
<td>Esc or - (hyphen)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Resources**

- Colour Scheme Creator - [color.adobe.com](http://color.adobe.com)
- Colour Contrast Checker - [thinkoutsidetheslide.com/color-contrast-calculator](http://thinkoutsidetheslide.com/color-contrast-calculator)
- Graphics - [unsplash.com](http://unsplash.com)  
  [pixabay.com](http://pixabay.com)  
  [lifeofpix.com](http://lifeofpix.com)