Five Rules for Better PowerPoint Presentations

PowerPoint can be a wonderful tool if used correctly. It can also be a dangerous distraction that interferes with communication rather than facilitating it. In my role as President of Thomas Nelson, I sit through scores of presentations. Most of these are on PowerPoint. Most of them are done poorly.

I sometimes think the presenter would be more compelling if he would ditch the PowerPoint and just speak. Because of this, I’ve even thought of outlawing PowerPoint in our company. But alas, PowerPoint has become a staple of corporate life. It is the ubiquitous prop that attends every presentation.

So if we can’t outlaw it, at least we can regulate it and, hopefully, try to improve it. Here are my five rules for making more effective PowerPoint presentations.

**Rule #1: Don’t give PowerPoint center stage.** This is the biggest mistake I see speakers make. They forget that PowerPoint is a tool designed to *augment* their presentation not *be* their presentation. You are the presenter. You are the focus. Not your slides. Not your props. And not your handouts. You are in the lead role and you need to retain that role. No amount of “razzle dazzle” can overcome a weak presentation. If you don't do your job, PowerPoint can’t save you. It only makes a bad presentation worse.

**Rule #2: Create a logical flow to your presentation.** Better yet, tell a story. (See Cliff Atkinson’s *Beyond Bullet Points.*) The absolute last thing you want to do is turn your presentation into a random assortment of bulleted lists, which is what often happens when PowerPoint is involved. There *must* be a flow. Start with a good outlining program (e.g., I use *OmniOutliner*) or just use the one built-into Microsoft Word. Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told...
them. If people understand where you are going to take them, they can relax and enjoy the ride. If they don’t, they will be distracted and frustrated.

**Rule #3: Make your presentation readable.** I constantly ask myself, *why is this so difficult?* Memorize this sentence: “If people can’t read my slides from the back of the room, my type is too small.” Now repeat it over and over again while you create your slides. If people are squinting during your presentation, trying to make out what’s on the slide, you have lost your audience. In my experience you must use at least 30-point type. Obviously, it depends on the size of the room, the size of the screen, etc. This is precisely why you can’t afford to leave this to chance. You must test your slides and make certain they are readable.

In *Really Bad PowerPoint (And How to Avoid It)*, Seth Godin also sets forth five PowerPoint rules. In the first one he says, “No more than six words on a slide. EVER.” I think this is too extreme, but you get the idea. The more words you use, the less readable they become. I have made some really effective presentations with no more than a word or two per slide. It can be done.

Here are some other things to remember regarding text:

- **Avoid paragraphs or long blocks of text.** If you really, really must use a paragraph, then whittle it down to the bare essentials. Use an excerpt—a couple of sentences. Emphasize the important words. Put the text block by itself on a single slide.

- **Use appropriate fonts.** I recommend a sans serif font for titles (e.g., Arial, Verdana, Helvetica, etc.) and a serif font for bullets or body text (e.g., Times New Roman, Garamond, Goudy, Palatino, etc.). Most books are typeset this way because it makes them more readable. The serifs help you recognize the characters (and thus the words) faster. It makes the text more readable. It’s also customary to use san serif fonts for chart labels.

- **Avoid detailed reports.** If you need to include a report in your presentation, hand it out. Don’t force people to try to read a ledger printout on a slide. It’s maddening! If you must show a report, use it as a picture and then use a “call out” to emphasize the part of the report you want people to focus on.

- **Avoid “title capitalization” unless (duh!) it’s a title.** Sentence capitalization is much easier to read. For
example, “Sales are up 100% in the southeast region” is easier than “Sales Are Up 100% In The Southeast Region.” This is especially true when you have numerous bullet points.

Rule #4: Remember, less is more. Fancy slide transitions and fly-ins get old quickly. I strongly recommend that you keep things simple. A basic dissolve from one slide to another is sufficient. Have all your bullets appear at once rather than one at a time. Avoid sound effects—they serve no other purpose than annoying the audience and distracting them from your presentation. And finally, cut down the number of slides. You don’t need a transcript of your speech with every point and sub-point! People are only going to remember the major points any way.

Rule #5: Distribute a handout. For those who like to take notes, they can take them right on the handout. It also keeps people from getting frustrated when they can’t write down what is on every slide. Again, you don’t want people to get distracted and tune you out. In my experience, a handout helps them stay focused on you.

Finally, I would encourage you to hone your PowerPoint skills like you would any other essential business skill. The more you work at it, the better you will get. And the better you get the more compelling your presentations will become. If you haven’t done so already, you might want to start with my list of PowerPoint resources.

Note to Mac Users: Dump PowerPoint and use Apple Keynote instead. It is the software that first gave me Mac Envy and eventually convinced me to buy an Apple PowerBook.