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PowerPoint Tips, Tricks, & Hacks: Everything You Should Know about How to NOT Ruin a Presentation

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# PowerPoint Tips, Tricks, & Hacks: Everything You Should Know About How to Not Ruin a Presentation

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Introduction

“It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it.” It’s a familiar adage, and it speaks to a particular trait about how we present and receive information: the importance of visual cues. As professionals that are required to communicate as matter of course, lawyers are intimately aware that how you present a statement is almost as important as the content of what you are saying. That’s not to say one can make a completely baseless claim but deliver it in such a way that no one would question its merits and get away with it. However, I am sure there have been moments when observing another attorney (or any type of presentation in another setting) where you have walked away completely confident in the speaker’s knowledge or competence, only to realize that there was actually very little substance to their statements. Rather, the speaker took full advantage of our proclivity to assign truth and value to statements made in an attractive, understandable, and memorable manner.

There have been attempts to quantify the non-verbal aspects of communication, like one publication that claimed that 93% of all communication is non-verbal. The methodology of that study has since been debunked¹, so a better (and completely unscientific) description comes from comedian Eddie Izzard: “It’s 70 percent how you look, 20 percent how you sound, and 10 percent is what you actually say.” Utilizing the right motions, visuals, posture, tone, and other cues can maximize your audience’s ability to sympathize, comprehend, or remember. It’s something many of us understand and practice personally and professionally, whether we realize it or not.

¹ http://ubiquity.acm.org/article.cfm?id=2043156
However, poor use of these cues can absolutely destroy your ability to effectively communicate. Regardless of how important or convincing a point is by itself, if it’s accompanied by terrible visual cues, it can and will be dismissed without a second thought. And while poor posture, inability to make eye-contact, and speaking too softly, slowly, or quickly can ruin a presentation, so too can terrible visual aids. Things that distract the attention (way too much text to read before transitioning to another slide), annoy the audience (reading word-for-word the text presented), and obfuscate the message (animations and sounds that shock your senses) are well known maladies that seem to be inherent in many presentations that are ‘augmented’ by slideshow software. And all of these problems (and more!) are implemented with an ease that would call into question the motives of the one who would provide such a tool. Of course I am talking about PowerPoint.

PowerPoint has been around for more than 25 years. It has been installed at least 1 billion times. 350 presentations are done every second with PowerPoint². And for the most part, our PowerPoint assisted presentations are still terrible. But it’s not PowerPoint’s fault; not entirely, at least. There are right and wrong ways to use PowerPoint, but the software is not going to inform you about them. It will fade bullet pointed lists in and out of view to emphasize your points as you speak, and it will swivel-bounce to a block of text that you can read verbatim as you stare at the slide and not acknowledge your audience. One of these is good and one is decidedly less than good, but both are a combination of PowerPoint and presentation skill (or lack thereof).

² http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2012-08-30/death-to-powerpoint
In this paper, I won’t be going into the basics of working with PowerPoint; I assume most people are familiar with the process of putting together a slideshow intended to be displayed along with a presentation. There are, however, some “power user” tips that I will discuss since there are useful features that are hidden under PowerPoint’s surface. The focus of this paper is to discuss how to make your presentation better with PowerPoint than it would be without it. Part of that is learning about the functions built into the software, but expertly working with PowerPoint is just as much about understanding what does and does not work when using software in conjunction with a verbal presentation. In fact, many of the tips and lessons are general enough to apply to other pieces of presentation software, like Keynote or Google Slides. This paper will discuss some of the considerations you should be mindful of when creating a presentation or composing a slide. Some of these are common sense but easy to lost track of, some are aspects that only present themselves when unexpected situations occur, and some are intuitive but just plain difficult to do. And again, very few of these are ever spelled out in PowerPoint or any other program; these are just practices to integrate into your overall presentation style and process. I will conclude the paper with a brief discussion of new and different types of presentation software, as well as their positives, negatives, and quirks.

Ultimately, these different pieces of presentation software are tools to augment a presentation, and having the right understandings and expectations will help make the best and most memorable experience for your audience. Because as another adage puts it: “People will forget what you said, but not how you made them feel.”
Presentation Do’s and Don’ts

Before launching into the details, I should point out the number one, and perhaps the only, rule for good presentation software use: don’t create distractions. This should be your goal, your guiding principle, and the metric by which you evaluate every element of your slideshow. When adding anything, be it a slide, picture, or even a single word, ask yourself “does this help illustrate the point I’m trying to make, or is this distracting from it?” Some of this is intuitive: how much illustrative value does a star-wipe animation or picture of a cat have when talking about tort reform? Some distractions won’t become apparent until you see them in the context of your entire slideshow, and some are more subtle or downright unintuitive. The number one distraction that falls into this latter category is the use of text on a slide.

If you envision the typical poorly done PowerPoint slide, it is probably a bullet pointed list. Which is easy to understand, especially if you’ve ever spent any amount of time working with PowerPoint: the default layout for textual information is in bullet points. However you usually don’t improve anything with bullet points during the course of a presentation so, for the most part, you want to avoid using them when you can help it. Because if all you have are bullet points, you don’t need PowerPoint; rather than letting the slideshow repeat what you’re saying, you should be using it to supplement your presentation instead. You should be the one presenting the information and the software should be emphasizing, not the other way around.

In fact, don’t use text if you don’t have to; images are far more effective at conveying a message compared to text when used in a slideshow. Studies have shown that people learn and retain more when a message is communicated using a combination of spoken word and images. This is because you’re using two different
parts of your brain to handle two different kinds of stimuli: the left hemisphere of your brain processes speech while your right hemisphere process images. When using words and pictures together, you are communicating on two parallel channels of comprehension and providing a more robust message. However, speech and text are both left brain tasks and are handled by the same “processor,” so when you speak and present text for your audience to read, you are overloading that processor.

Text certainly does have its uses though, like emphasizing a point, signaling when you’re making a transition, or when there simply isn’t a useful visual to accompany your point. But you should still try to minimize the use of text. At least one article contemplating the awfulness of most PowerPoints advocates that you should never have more than six words on your screen ever\(^3\), which is in keeping with trying to avoid creating a distraction by splitting the audience’s attention between reading and listening. If you have to use bullet points, use them as a broad outline with very simple statements per point to focus the audience. One good way to use bullet points and minimize the text on screen is to build the list item by item. Start with only one element, and when you advance, add the next element to the list. You can use emphasis (highlighting the new elements as they are added with different colored font) or de-emphasis (making the previous elements transparent or very light-colored as new elements are added) to achieve this effect. This is also a way of integrating graphical elements into your text, capitalizing on the aforementioned synergy between learning with images and text.

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\(^3\) http://www.sethgodin.com/freeprize/reallybad-1.pdf
All this is predicated on actually understanding what you’re written, so always consider the readability of your text. Size definitely matters; you absolutely have to make sure all the text you use is big enough to be read from anywhere in the audience. 24 point font is the smallest you should go, and if the screen you’re using is particularly small, you may need to go even larger (more on this later). Avoid italics (hard to read) and silly fonts (Comic Sans is never a good idea) as a means of emphasis. Instead, choose a readable font and use it consistently, and use bold font or contrasting colors to emphasize words or phrases as necessary. If you need to put a lot of text in front of your audience to review or follow along with, consider providing a handout to accompany your presentation. Avoiding putting too much text on screen will also help you manage the margins of your slides. The closer a graphical or the text element is to the edges of the screen, the harder it becomes to read/see, so make sure your margins are generous. Realize that different screen sizes or projector configurations can drastically alter the size of your margins. A slide can look perfectly framed on your computer, but text or graphics can easily be lost above or below the screen if the projector is configured differently.

When using text, if you follow the advice of using large, readable fonts and employing sufficient margins, you will inevitably find that there simply isn’t enough space on a slide to fit everything you need to get your point across. Suppose, for example, you need to talk about a particularly long and complex statute. Rather than putting the entire statute on a single slide and using a micro-font to achieve it, select a series of excerpts and spread them out across a number of slides. To further enhance these selections, use visual elements like color highlights, underlining/arrows/circles, or simply bolding to highlight the words or phrase that are the most important. This way
you can still have a fairly sizeable, yet manageable, amount of text while emphasizing the core elements in a simple and readable way.

On the subject of screens and projectors, keep the size of the screen and the room you’re presenting in in mind. If the screen is on the small side or the room extends very far away from the screen, the font needs to be larger to compensate. If you have the opportunity, scope out the venue beforehand to get an idea of how big the font should be. If not, try to contact the IT or audio/visual technician at the location and find out the specifications of the screen, projector, and room. Regardless of whether you do it yourself or with the aid of someone at the presentation site, try to find out the following details before presenting:

1. Is the screen built into the room, or will it need to be set up before hand? How about the projector? Is it the usual projector/screen setup, or is the screen a large flat-screen monitor?
2. Will there be a laptop/computer connected to the projector, or will you need to provide your own?
3. If you need to bring your own laptop, what connection does the projector have? VGA, DVI, or HDMI? Will there be adaptors, or should you bring your own?
4. Will a slide advancer/clicker be provided?
5. What resolution is the screen? 4:3 means your slides need to be roughly square sized, while 16:9 means your slides should be widescreen in format. Having your slides in the wrong format will cause them to look squished vertically or very small on a relatively large screen (respectively).
With slide backgrounds, try to avoid using overly elaborate background themes. Some of the simpler themes in PowerPoint use blocks or shapes of color that frame the subject of the slide, and those can work well depending on what you’re trying to convey. There are also plenty of overly elaborate themes out there, with things like floral patterns or cartoon caricatures of business people pointing at cubist representations of blackboards. These introduce a number of unimportant elements to your slides and just distract the viewer, so try to avoid these as much as possible unless there’s a very specific reason.

Whether your background is some type of visual theme or very simplistic, try to use it consistently. And regardless of what kind of background is used, understand that the contrast between the background color and text color is important. Try to place dark text on light backgrounds, and vice versa. A poor choice of colors might not make something unreadable or indecipherable, but might make it a challenge to comprehend. That said, avoid jarring background colors to attain good contrast. It might provide excellent contrast to have black text on a neon green background, but the color makes the slide painful to even look at. Also consider the lighting in the room when picking background colors. In a well-lit room, black text on a white background is perfect. But in a very dark room, the same color combination is very glaring, so use a muted color like pale blue or gray.

Timing should also be a factor to consider when creating and arranging slides. The point of a slideshow is to help people understand or visualize what you’re talking about now. If you move on to talk about a new topic, but the slide from ten minutes ago is still up, it creates a dissonance between your speech and your visuals. The audience might be wondering if the new direction still has something to do with the previous
section/slide, and trying to reconcile the difference will just distract them. Instead, either create a slide that will emphasize the new topic, or insert a blank slide to shift the audience’s focus solely onto you. A good way to identify these gaps and pacing issues in your slideshow, and a good practice in general, is to practice. And practice. And practice some more. If you have the time and opportunity to put on a really excellent presentation, plan on spending one hour in researching, organizing, creating and practicing for every minute of the presentation. Know the order of your slides and know when you will be transitioning from one topic to the next. This will help you identify any out of order slides or stray topics that remain visually unsupported for extended periods of time.

A final note is to comment on something that probably made itself apparent while working through these practices: creating a good PowerPoint can be a challenge. Selecting the right fonts and colors for the venue, adding animations to every single item on every single list, rearranging elements to avoid confusion, synthesizing an abundance of information into a few short phrases, the hours of practice, etc. are not easy. When some of the things (for this is no exhaustive list by any stretch) that make a good PowerPoint are laid out, it’s no surprise that most are terrible. Fortunately enough, many of these practices become easier to execute with practice, but it takes time, effort, and commitment to get there. If you want to become one of the few that can create the mythical “good” PowerPoints, it needs to be part of the core of your presentation, and not something to throw together because you happen to have a screen at your disposal.
**PowerPoint Tips & Features**

While the previous section discussed practices that can be conducted with any type of presentation software, this section will provide some very specific tips regarding some of the more useful functions of PowerPoint. As of writing, these tips apply to the desktop PowerPoint 2013 product (as opposed to the version of PowerPoint available as part of Microsoft Office Online). While these functions may still be present in future versions of PowerPoint, they may be accessed differently.

**Reducing file sizes** – there are a couple different ways to manage the file size of your PowerPoint presentations. If all your presentation includes is text, the file size should never be an issue. Typically, the size begins to balloon when you start including graphics or photos, with visually intense presentations quickly growing to a size where emailing the file is impractical. One option is to crop images; to select only part of the image to keep and remove everything else. If you right click on any image in your presentation, part of the context menu that should pop up are the “Style” and “Crop” options. Selecting “Crop” will put icons on the corners and edges of the image, which you can drag to select the one portion of the image you want to keep. After you’ve made your selection, hit the Escape key and only the portion of the image will be kept to move and resize.

However, while the rest of the image may be gone from your slides, the entire image is kept within the contents of the file. To remove cropped portions of the images from the total size of the file, and to reduce the size of all photos in general, you need to go a step further. To start, left-click on any image in your presentation. On the top of the PowerPoint screen, a new menu item should appear titled “Picture Tools.” Beneath that should be a tab called “Format.” Selecting this tab will bring up a number of tools to
manipulate the selected image(s). Near the top-left should be “Compress Pictures”; clicking that will bring up the “Compress Pictures” tool window. Unless there is an image that definitely needs to be in high-definition, I would recommend unchecking the “Apply only to this picture” option. This will make sure the compression process is applied to every image, not just the selected one. Keep the second option “Delete cropped areas of pictures” checked as a matter of course. Below this is where you can select the quality of the compression process. The topmost will apply a minimum of compression, so the loss of quality in your images will be minor, but so will the reduction in file size. The second to last will noticeably downgrade the quality of your images, but will offer the greatest reduction in file size.

**Embedding fonts** – there are hundreds of fonts built into PowerPoint, but there are times when one might need use a third-party font, perhaps for stylistic reasons or for non-Roman alphabet languages. While this won’t be an issue if you are using your own computer or laptop to present, if you have to take your file and open it on a new computer, there’s a pretty good chance you won’t have access to fonts you used. This can result in PowerPoint defaulting to the “closest” font it can approximate, or in the case of foreign languages, a garbled mess. To embed the fonts into the file itself, click the File tab, and then select the Options item. From the PowerPoint Options window that pops up, select the Save item. Towards the bottom of the window is “Preserve fidelity when sharing this presentation:” along with the title of your current file. Check the “Embed fonts in the file” box and select the option that works best for you. If the presentation is complete and won’t need much additional editing, the first option is fine. If you need to share the file or edit on a different computer than usual, it’s best to select the second.
**Turn off the mouse cursor** – this is a feature that comes back to reducing the distractions caused by your slideshow. There are many different ways to highlight or emphasize something on a slide, like change its color, draw a circle around it, have an arrow point to it, etc. One way you should avoid using to emphasize something is to use the mouse icon and start gesticulating and pointing at things manually. Furthermore, if you’ve ever notice that your mouse cursor starts to jitter due to the optical sensor malfunctioning for some reason, you can also have a vibrating mouse cursor appear in the middle of a presentation. To hide the mouse icon for the entire PowerPoint, after you’ve started a presentation, you can hit ‘Ctrl’ + ‘H’. You can still right-click to bring up the context menu, but hitting Ctrl + H again will **not** bring the mouse cursor back. It will appear again when you end the presentation.

**Shortcuts** – there are some simple keyboard shortcuts to keep in mind when presenting. As discussed above, there may be a parts of your presentation where you do not need to use PowerPoint to display anything while you speak. Rather than inserting a blank slide, you can use the ‘B’ key and ‘W’ key to blank a presentation to a black or white screen, respectively. The ‘.’ and ‘,’ keys serve the same respective functions.

Instead of finding the icon to start a slideshow, you can use the ‘F5’ to start the presentation from the beginning. If for some reason you need to exit your slide show in the middle and come back to it, ‘Shift’ + ‘F5’ will start you from the current slide.

Finally, the basics: the space bar, ‘Page Down’, ‘N’ key, down-arrow key, and right-arrow key all advance slides, while ‘Backspace’, ‘Page Up’, ‘P’ key, up-arrow key and left-arrow key will go back in the slideshow.

**ClipArt** – a long time feature of the Office suite of products that was equally loved and derided was the collection of built in graphics collectively known as ClipArt. If
you’ve attempted to insert a simple image recently, you probably noticed that ClipArt was nowhere to be found. You’re not crazy: ClipArt is gone. Instead, the “Online Pictures” tool (accessible from the “Insert” menu item at the top of the PowerPoint screen) has replaced it. When using Online Picture, you get a simple window with a Bing Image Search box. While not nearly as robust as Google Image Search, Bing is a perfectly serviceable image search tool. My advice is to type a short (one or two word) description of what kind of image you’d like followed by the words “clip art” (without the quotation marks). For example, typing “computer screen clip art” returned 2900 results, all of which are free to use under the Creative Commons license. If you click the “Show all web results” that appears after your initial search you will see many more results, but some of these may be subject to copyright, so exercise your professional discretion when using these images.

**Alternative Presentation Software**

**Prezi** ([http://prezi.com](http://prezi.com)) envisions presentations as being expressed in “visual metaphors.” There is an offline version of the software, but Prezi is primarily accessed and manipulated by its online interface. If you’re not familiar with the software, it’s difficult to understand what that means until you actually see a Prezi, quite literally, in motion. Imagine you had all of your usual presentation slides on index cards, but instead of organizing them in a stack and flipping from one to the next, you arranged them spread out on a poster and moved the focus from one spot on the poster to another to advance. Creating and working through a Prezi is the same way. You start by identifying the theme or message of your presentation and selecting a premade template (or creating one yourself if nothing seems to fit). You can now take all of your ideas
(text, pictures, or videos) and put them onto this “digital canvas.” You can upload your own images into Prezi or use the built in Google Image Search tool to fine an image. You can also embed Youtube links, and the videos will also appear on the canvas. With all the “elements” laid out, you can arrange like items in relation to each other, with each element (or group of elements) becoming a “frame” (slide) in the presentation. Beginning, you see the whole canvas of elements laid out, but as you begin the presentation, Prezi zooms the screen into the first element. When advancing through the presentation, the screen will zoom out, shift the focus to the next frame, and zoom back in. If you want, you can even go down digital rabbit holes, with frames embedded in frames embedded in frames, so much that when zoomed all the way out they barely appear as pixels.

As one might have noticed, Prezi has a far greater focus on visuals than any other piece of presentation software out there. If you find that brainstorming or mind-dumping is particularly helpful for you to start a project, creating a Prezi can be a very helpful process for creating a presentation. Organizing thoughts visually not only helps you as the creator plot out the flow and appearance of information, it can ultimately aid your audience as well. Sticking to short phrases or images is a must if you want to effectively use Prezi. The software does allow for transitions and elements to fade into or out of visibility, but I would recommend using it sparingly. The strength of Prezi is the movement from frame to frame, so lingering on one frame for too long can minimize the impact.

Identifying or creating an appropriate template, creating and curating elements, arranging and reorienting them, and composing the flow from frame to frame is a very different experience from your typical slide-based presentation software. It helps if
you’re more than willing to flex your creative muscles when composing a Prezi since more than any others, the success of a Prezi lives and dies with the use of visuals. A well done Prezi can be very more compelling and engaging than any PowerPoint presentation. Done poorly, and you are liable to not only completely not convey your point, but leave your audience more confused than when they started (with a good chance you’ll give them motion sickness as well).

**Sway** ([http://sway.com](http://sway.com)) is Microsoft’s “digital storytelling app,” a new piece of software offered as part of Microsoft Office as an alternative to PowerPoint. As it was described to me by a colleague that had access to the preview version of the app, it’s a combination of PowerPoint, Prezi, and Tumblr (the microblogging platform). It’s a surprisingly apt description, considering Sway is primarily intended to be viewed on a computer or mobile screen, not exactly with a projector/screen. It has many of the same tools for composing slides as PowerPoint, but has many of the motion and media elements of Prezi, while presenting itself in an online publishing format like Tumblr.

Sway is not a replacement for PowerPoint, but is intended for presentations done on the web, either live (like a webinar) or created beforehand and experienced at a later date.

Since Sway presentations are generally viewed on a computer, the ability to interact with multimedia elements of the presentation are built in. For example, if your slide includes some text, 2 cropped images and a video, a viewer can click on the images to see the full version (and click again to return to the original slide) as well as play the video. Being primarily cloud-based, it allows for integration with media sites like Youtube, Soundcloud, Vine, and others, making it very appealing for with any presentation with multimedia elements.
All this being said, trying to use it as a replacement for more traditional pieces of presentation requires an entirely different approach to composition. Since it is primarily intended to be experienced on a computer screen, it is easy to compose a presentation that will look perfectly fine if viewed while sitting at your computer, but will look far too small or cluttered on a traditional projector. If you intend to give Sway a shot, give yourself plenty of time to familiarize yourself with the new features, view some of the sample sway presentations available on the website to get an idea of what it’s best suited for, and take advantage of the tutorials provided by Microsoft.