



Presenting your research using PowerPoint

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Characteristics of a bad presentation:

A bad presentation typically consists of lots of text slides, with an endless sequence of bullet point lists of sentence fragments. The presenter reads each slide to the audience – ineffectively using the PowerPoint as a teleprompter. A good indication of a bad presentation is if the PowerPoint deck of handouts can be understood just as well without going to the talk. Often, the background level of knowledge of the audience is not taken into consideration. The presenter is sometimes surprised by his next slide (“Oh, that shouldn’t be there – I wonder what happened.”) and runs over time, clearly not having rehearsed the talk.

For a reasonable presentation:

Plan your presentation:

Questions to consider: How much time do you have? Who is the audience? How much back story will they need before you can get to the good stuff (i.e., your research findings)? Of course, this implies you will have different talks for expert versus non-expert audiences. The latter are much more important if you plan to get a job...

More questions: What is the key message you want them to go away with? If there isn’t one, why are you giving the talk? Is PowerPoint the appropriate supporting tool? In the planning stage, go analog – brainstorm ideas, then storyboard possible slides before you sit down at the computer. Otherwise you’ll get distracted finding the perfect font or background colour when you should be worrying about CONTENT.

Design the presentation:

Use the storyboards from above. Design three parts of your talk – the slides, your notes, and a handout to leave behind – and keep them separate in your mind. Make your talk a narrative – with a beginning, a core, and an end. Select visuals that reinforce what you are saying. Don’t use graphs and diagrams directly from manuscripts or papers – they will need larger fonts for readability. Don’t use tables of data.

Rehearse – can you cover all that stuff in the time allowed? With grace? Start trimming material until your rehearsal only takes 80% of the time you’ve been allocated. Don’t keep anything that isn’t core to your take-home message.

Give the presentation:

Of course you’re nervous. You are human, right? Keep cues in case you stumble – Presenter View in PowerPoint helps. Don’t hide behind the lectern. Make eye contact. Use a remote to advance your slides. End early – no one resents a short talk. Enjoy.

Reading and resources:

- Atherton, Chris (2009) Visual attention: a psychologist's perspective. Presentation at TCUK09. Accessed 15 Nov 2009 at http://www.slideshare.net/CJAtherton/chris_atherton_attcuk09
- Atkinson, Cliff (2008) Beyond bullet points. Microsoft Press.
- Benka, Stephen G. (2008) Who is listening? What do they hear? *Physics Today*, December 2008, 49–53.
- Duarte, Nancy (2008) *slide:ology*. O'Reilly. I just received this book from Amazon Tuesday; I've been very impressed with what I've read so far. Similar philosophy as Garr Reynolds (see below) but more nuts and bolts tips than *Presentation Zen*. The two complement each other.
- FGSR Professional Development: You should take a look at the Professional Development section of the FGSR website (<http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/profdev/>). In the 'Communication' category, there's an excellent 'Communication Module' (<http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/profdev/communicationmodule.htm>). This 'Module' consists of a number of topics under three general categories: "How to Prepare Your Presentation", "How to Deliver Your Presentation", and "Criticism and Feedback". Each topic has a brief (1–2 page) summary, which includes links to further reading. Well worth spending some time here.
- Godin, Seth: Really Bad PowerPoint (and how to avoid it) http://www.sethgodin.com/freeprize/reallybad_1.pdf
- Kaminski, S. PowerPoint Presentations: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly <http://www.shkaminski.com/Classes/Handouts/powerpoint.htm>
- Reynolds, Garr (2008) *Presentation Zen: Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery*. New Riders. Also check out his Presentation Zen website (www.presentationzen.com) and his personal website (www.garreynolds.com). On the latter, be sure to check out the page on Presentation tips –his handout is excellent: (http://www.garreynolds.com/Presentation/pdf/presentation_tips.pdf). Another good resource is the video of his talk at Google: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZ2vtQCESpk>). I can't say enough good about this author; after Benka got me thinking about the problem, Reynolds changed my thinking about presentations.