

The Dark Side don'ts of PowerPoint

Everyone uses PowerPoint! It's expected, in fact, in most professional and business situations. It's convenient and cheap since virtually every computer has it and every computer can run it. It's great for the nervous speaker who can stare at the computer screen instead of looking at the critical eyes of those in the audience. It's also nice for the typically bored audience which now has something somewhat interesting to look at. The problem is that nearly everyone uses PowerPoint incorrectly, and often the disadvantages of using the tool often outweigh the advantages.

The visual medium

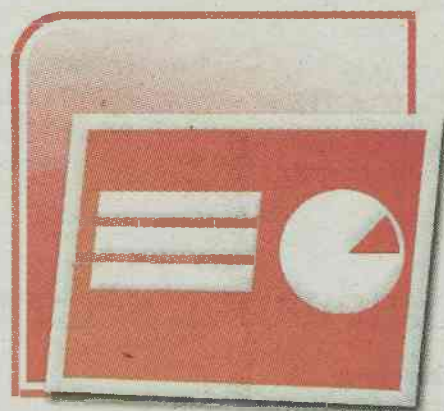
If you can use words to explain your subject, you do not need a visual aid. PowerPoint is best used to transmit to the audience information that can't be explained easily through words alone. It should not be used as a verbal medium. But what do most people put on their slides? Words. I would much rather that you have a conversation with me as an audience member than speak to me through a screen. When reading, you lose the speaker-audience connection that is so important for building speaker credibility, speaker authority, and community. But when you are trying to explain the consequences of smoking tobacco for twenty years, PowerPoint could be useful. It is a thousand times more effective to show a picture of a diseased lung than a bunch of bullet points. You need to do it right, though.

Use as few as possible

Please use single line titles and single line bullet points for your text. Do not make your audiences read any more than this. They can't listen to you and read copious amounts of text at the same time, or at least not very well. As a general rule of thumb, don't use more than 6 words per line, and probably not more than 20 words for any given slide. So, for those of you who like to copy and paste entire paragraphs of information into a slide, I will not be your friend. I will not be a good audience member. I will not learn much from you. I will, however, be complaining to the person next to me, or texting, or drawing in my notebook.

Avoid gimmicks

PowerPoint comes with a panoply of fun templates, images, animated images, sound clips, and more. But don't be tempted by the dark side. These clipart images are cheap, gimmicky, and overused. By overused, I mean that your audience has prob-



ably seen these particular images many times by now, and they no longer hold any unique value. Perform an image search through Google or Yahoo and start at the 10th page. You are guaranteed to find some unique pictures this way. Just please be professional and remember to cite the source of your images on your PowerPoint slide.

Unless you are playing an audio clip for a very specific reason, don't use sound. If you do, check the volume settings and don't use them as sound transitions. I once had a student who included the sound of a canon firing with the click of each new slide. He thought it would be a fun way to keep their attention. The computer locked up for whatever reason, and the student started clicking the mouse repeatedly in an attempt to "fix" the problem. Once the computer caught up, you can imagine what happened. We went flying through fifteen slides and fifteen extremely loud (didn't check the sound settings!) canon explosions. At this point, there was no way this student was going to refocus the audience's attention on what mattered—the content of the presentation.

What you are doing now with PowerPoint is probably lazy and ineffective. Call this the tough love portion of my column. You know this already, though. You've even seen your share of lazy and ineffective presentations, and yours likely fits right in. Do something different. Develop your speaking skills, engage your audience, increase the energy level of your presentation, and limit your use of PowerPoint! It should always be used as a supplement, not as a substitute! So don't hide behind it. Get out in front and be the focus.

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Friends, family, food, fun, graduation audit... check

Happy Holidays ladies and gentlemen! By the time you are actually reading this, many of you will already be preparing for the holidays this year. Many of you will be traveling home for the holidays. For some it may be a local commute while for others it will be a longer drive – or a plane ride.

I dread and love the holiday season equally. My dread comes from the traffic and ridiculous distances I usually travel to see family. It never fails no matter where I go this time of year there is a traffic jam, accident, or roadblock. Sometimes I'll hit all three on my trips. I know I am not the only one to have experienced this. This year will be different since most of my family is local now. I can just relax and not stress out over the lengths of highway I have to see. Instead I'll be able to center on the other practice happening this month that every student needs to have as a focus. I'm talking of course about spring registration.

For me spring registration usually doesn't mean much beyond making sure I can get into enough classes that will fill my major requirements and have me listed as a full time student. But this time around things are different. For me this is a big transition. Just like many other commuters, I'm transitioning from a junior to a senior and at the same time I'll be submitting for graduation. So the added stress that won't be used on traveling now is on this constant worry in the back of my mind that for some reason there will be a class that I have missed and it will hold up my graduation date.

I have talked to several commuters I've had classes with and it seems to be a fairly common trend when you hit that point of, "OMG I'm going graduate! Do I have everything I need handled?!?" Add on to the

fact we have the drives to worry about as well as families, jobs, and other random occurrences it is understandable why so many will be worried about making sure that everything is correct when putting in for graduation.

In most cases the biggest problems occur when we don't see our advisor to cover everything for our curriculum requirements. The advisors are there for just that purpose – to help and make sure you hit all the marks and get to where you need to be in time for a successful graduation. They are, for the most part, very accommodating of a commuter's schedule and willing to meet with you occasionally to help you register for the next semester's classes correctly.

Even if you aren't graduating you need to stay on top of things with them in order to decrease the OMG level when you are on the verge of graduation. Another huge help that people don't realize they have will be other students. Talk to students in your major field about courses that you are about to take in order to get a heads up about an instructor's expectations in a course. It helps to go in prepared instead of floundering around wondering what will happen. Proper preparation will prevent last-minute freakouts.

In the end it's up to you to stay on top of everything as you press on through your college career. As long as you pay close attention you are sure to graduate just fine. Take care over the coming holiday break. Don't overload on turkey and come back safe. At that point, we will only have just a small leg of our semester-long journey left. With less than a month to go it only would make sense to come back and wrap it up.

CHRIS HAYES
COMMUTER BLOG

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