

# Put Power into Your Presentations: Using Presentation Software Effectively

By Robert J. Safransky, Ph.D., and Marsha L. Burmeister, Ed.D.



“Death by PowerPoint” is common corporate parlance. Some companies and conference organizers have prohibited PowerPoint, and the press perennially skewers it as a thought-free plague. One legal scholar, tongue-in-cheek, proposed a constitutional amendment banning its use.

—J. Sandberg, *Wall Street Journal*, November 14, 2006

**W**hat was the last conference you attended where PowerPoint or something akin to it was not used during at least one presentation?

Microsoft PowerPoint, Apple Keynote, and OpenOffice Impress are relatively common tools in the classroom and in the boardroom these days. What makes presentation soft-

ware so popular? As the Chinese proverb declares, a picture is worth a thousand words. We like visual presentations. Presentation software can make even a dull subject come to life with colorful text, videos, and hyperlinks.

Presentation software is easy to use (as evidenced by the many online tutorials as well as at least one book in the famous *For Dummies* series). A short course on creating presentations gets one up and running quickly; however, many tips and tricks can make them “more presentable.”

## First Things First

Before jumping full force into creating a presentation with the software of your choice, however, first ask yourself, “What is the general topic

of my presentation?” As with any kind of presentation, it’s important to know your audience, your goals, and the information you want to share. Outline your key points *before* you start generating slides, not during the process.

When you have an outline “on paper,” it’s time to get creative. You might begin by developing a “master slide” using one of the design templates that offers a preset color scheme, font, and general format. Your instructional technology department may be able to help you incorporate your district’s logo onto the master slide—and carry it through the entire presentation.

Because readability is a goal, consider the font style and size. Point size must be sufficient for easy reading from a distance. Fine print is unsuitable for presentations.

Equally important is the color scheme. The clearest and most familiar color scheme is black on white, of course. Projectors vary in their brightness; a low-lumen projector or a room that is insufficiently dark will wreak havoc with visibility. Avoid sharp contrast color schemes (red on blue, yellow on red, and so on); they are not only distracting but can actually hurt the eyes.

## Clear Content

Once you have settled on a color scheme and overall theme, your next task is to outline your key points on each slide. The *outline view* feature of the software can help you input your outline and automatically add slides.

## PRESENTATION CHECKLIST

- Do you have an appropriate master slide, color scheme, and font size?
- Did you follow the six-by-six rule?
- Did you use custom animation, sound, and transitions judiciously (or not at all)?
- Do you have at least one appropriate visual per slide?
- Do you have a concluding slide?
- Have you checked the venue for your presentation to ensure that the audience can see the slides?
- Have you rehearsed your presentation to check the equipment?
- Are you familiar with the content so you can speak about it rather than read it?
- Have you proofread your slides carefully?
- Have you developed an appropriate handout?

Crafting the content slides may be the hardest part of developing your presentation. For it to be most powerful, you should practice the KISS principle: Keep It Short and Simple. Include only a few words on a slide as a path for your viewers.

The age-old formula of instruction applies as you begin to generate your content slides: tell your audience what you will say, say it, and then review what you have said. After an initial introductory slide that includes the title of the presentation or the topic, your name, and contact information, include an “agenda” slide that briefly lists your presentation’s content.

How much content should you fit on a slide? Many presenters use the unwritten “six-by-six rule”: no more than six lines on a slide and no more than six words to a line. If you can’t fit the content into this rule, then break the content into two or three slides or pare down the content. Proofread carefully—your credibility may be at stake! Use the spelling and grammar check tools.

### Adding Visuals

Presentation software provides a visual that attracts the attention of the audience and helps maintain interest. This software has many features that, when used in moderation, enhance the visuals. These features include custom animations, graphics, and photographs. The presentation software comes with a variety of clip

art options but you may also insert graphics or photos from outside sources. Hyperlinks to Web-based resources allow you to access the Internet during your presentation as well.

Cornell University’s Department of Applied Economics and Management offers a searchable online database of more than 6,000 digital video clips that address such topics as leadership, business, real estate, energy, technology, and even Hollywood. These “eClips” are available online at [www.eclips.cornell.edu](http://www.eclips.cornell.edu).

Remember that adding videos, photos, charts, and other graphics may dramatically increase the size of your presentation file. If you are transporting your presentation to another computer, you may have to burn a CD or use an appropriately sized thumb drive. Size is also a concern if you plan to upload your presentation for online viewing. Large files take time to upload and download; the connectivity of your audience may make this a difficult or frustrating task.

Also, proper attention to copyright is necessary. Always obtain permission to use copyrighted materials.

Don’t use all the bells and whistles just because you can! Sound can be especially irritating. The “typewriter effect” is annoying, to say the least. Little is gained from using the sound of breaking glass or whizzing bullets. When discussing money, it might be

tempting to insert the “ka-ching” of a cash register; please don’t!

Custom animations can be useful (dim content bullets as you progress through the presentation, for example). Again, don’t overdose with these techniques just because you can. Swiveling and spinning text has little educational value. And the best use of sound is not to use it at all!

### Other Considerations

Investing in a wireless remote control for your computer is worth consideration. By using a USB connection, you won’t be tethered to the podium. Remote devices usually have a laser pointer and mouselike functionality to advance slides, go back, or blank the screen. If a remote is not an option, place the mouse as far from the computer as possible so you can click without standing behind the computer.

People like handouts. They can be printed from your slides in a variety of layouts. In addition to printing the entire slide (useful if you are going to use transparencies and the overhead in lieu of a data projector), you can also print six slides per page (a thumbnail approach) or three slides per page. The latter layout provides lines for handwritten notes. You might print out the slides for your presentation and then add notes to yourself to guide you throughout.

While some question the effectiveness of presentation software, it is certainly here to stay. Our best advice is to focus on content rather than on the software itself.

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