Preparing Effective Verbal and Visual Presentations

PowerPoint Tips

Having sat through literally hundreds of PowerPoint presentations, and having made many of my own mistakes in using presentation software, here are a few things to keep in mind when designing your own PowerPoint presentation. Above all, remember that PowerPoint is a complement to your presentation. It is not your script, not a crutch or substitute for a poor verbal presentation, and not the primary attraction for your audience—that is you and your verbal presentation! Here are a few tips:

- Less is more! One of the most common errors is to have too many slides, and/or to have too many words per slide.
  - For a 15-minute presentation, you should be thinking in terms of 5 substantive slides (plus a title slide). Think in terms of the big pieces of your research project: the question and general topic, the scholarship on the topic, the methods you used, some key pieces of evidence, and the major take-away or “so what” points.
  - For text, a good rule of thumb is no more than 80 words per slide and no smaller than a 20-point font; I’d encourage even fewer words per slide!²
  - Some experts recommend a “6 by 6” maximum—no more than six bullet points per slide; no more than 6 words per bullet point. Try it out!³

- Avoid complex or brightly colored background schemas. These are distracting and can even be painful to view. A plain white background with black text (or a similarly simple scheme) keeps the focus on the content.

- Don’t get fancy with the animation. PowerPoint offers all sorts of ways to slide, twist, or warp text in as you introduce bullet points. Don’t use these. Stick with the simple “appear on click” type commands.

- Use the slides as a complement to your verbal presentation. The real substance of a presentation is in the words that you speak and in your engagement with the audience, not in the bullet points that you put up on a screen. This means that you should do a few things:
  - Take the time to think through, write out, and practice your verbal presentation. Then, practice it again, and again, and again (with a timer). You may have note cards or a page of notes, but you should be so familiar with your presentation that you can do it from memory!
  - Design bullet points for your slides that present key words, phrases, or ideas to guide your audience. Do not duplicate the things that you will be presenting verbally, though—your slides should be visual cues for your verbal presentation.
  - Avoid reading from your slides.
  - Make sure you face your audience and talk to them, not to the screen!

- Use PowerPoint to integrate graphics, images, tables/charts, or video. In other words, use PowerPoint to show material that you can’t present verbally.

¹ Adapted from Aaron P. Boesenecker, “PowerPoint Tips” (handout), American University, March 2011, and Betsy Cohn, Guidelines for Making Great Posters” (handout) American University, December 2011.
² See Ron Hassner, “Sliding Into Home Plate: How to Use Slideware to Improve Your Presentation (While Dodging the Bullets),” PS: Political Science and Politics 38, no. 3 (July 2005): 393-397.
³ Ibid.
**Graphs and Visual Data Tips**

Using pictures, graphs, charts, or tables (in color if possible) can be an effective way to illustrate certain types of information. However, your graphics should be just as easy to read as your text, and they should be the appropriate form for presenting the information you are trying to convey. For example:

**DON'T DO**

This graph is essentially unreadable. It drowns the reader in minute details, and while it does make use of both colors and line lengths to simultaneously report two variables at once, the lines (and headings) are too small to be readable.

*Source: Global Nonfuel Mineral Resources and Sustainability*  
*Source: San Francisco Chronicle Gate. Found at:  

**IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION**

This graph uses just two colors, and features a clear scale on the Y-axis so that your readers immediately know what is being measured (number of appearances per party, per network). Blue and red are also an effective color choice because they match the traditional colors of these two parties. However, the graph is still falls short in terms of getting its meaning across. Quickly: which network, between CNBC and MSNBC, was more favorable to Republicans? If it took you longer to figure this out than it would take to read the same figures off a table, your graph’s not doing its job.


**ANOTHER STEP, EVEN BETTER**

This graph uses the same colors from the previous data, but has chosen a better format for answering questions about favoritism: the pie chart. It’s now far easier to get a sense of which networks favored which party; and as a bonus, the size of the pie charts themselves can be allowed to vary to distinguish between the channel with the most overall appearances by politicians of either party (MSNBC) and the channel with the least (CNN). This graph serves your data: it doesn’t just reproduce it in graphical form. This makes it a far more useful tool in terms of quickly conveying information to a viewer.