Polishing Your PowerPoint

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Frustrated with PowerPoint? Looking for ways to make your own presentations better? These tips and techniques will help you create a presentation that looks good, engages your audience, and showcases your expertise.

Planning ahead

1. **Know your audience.** Your presentation should be tailored to who you are speaking to, whether it is professional colleagues, community members, or students. The presentation you give for colleagues is not the one you should be giving to a community group.
2. **Know your venue.** Where are you presenting? Is there a stage? How big is the screen? Will you have a remote for advancing your slides? Will you have a microphone? Find out as much as you can about the venue and the equipment so you can prepare accordingly.
3. **Write a script or outline.** What is the key message you want your audience to take away? Plan your presentation with a script or outline that highlights your message.
4. **Plan for time.** Make sure your presentation fits within the time you are given. If you run out of time, it means you didn't plan ahead.

Effective slide design

Effective slide design is the backbone of your presentation. These dos and don'ts cover basic design elements.

1. **Don't use default templates.** Default PowerPoint templates are overused and poorly designed. You can create your own clean and simple custom template with just a background color or a slight gradient or color shift. You can also find thousands of free templates online, but beware – these can also be poorly designed. Make sure your content is the focus, not the slide background. There are tutorials online that can show you how simple it is to create your own slide template.

2. **Do customize your slides.** Using the same basic slide over and over bores your audience. Customize with different formats, colors, and fonts, but don't overdo it; keep your theme consistent. Consider finding a tutorial that shows you how to edit master slides that you can apply to your presentation with a few clicks.

3. **Don't use all capitals.** All caps is often taken to mean you are yelling, and you don't want to yell at your audience. Plus, it is hard to read on the screen. Use a picture or graphic to emphasize your point instead.

4. **Do use contrasting colors.** Slides that people can't read aren't good slides. Make sure your text is visible by using contrasting colors (dark text on a light background or vice versa). There are websites that can help you choose a good contrasting color scheme.

5. **Don't use a lot of text.** Your audience is there to hear from you, not read your slide. Ideally, your presentation should not be understandable without you there to explain it; after all, if your audience can read it themselves, what do they need you for? Your slides are meant to support your presentation, not supplant it. Avoid bullets, but if you do use them, follow the 6 x 6 rule: no more than six words per line, and no more than six lines per slide. You can also provide a handout with more detailed information, either before or after your presentation.

6. **Do make it readable.** Choose a font that is easy to see on screen. A sans serif font (like Arial or Calibri) is easier to read that a serif font (like Times New Roman or Garamond). Don't use gimmicky fonts like Comic Sans.

7. **Don't use low-quality images.** Images are ideal for adding visual emphasis and interest to your presentation, but images that are blurry, pixelated, dark, or confusing are worse than no image at all. A good rule of thumb: if you feel like you have to apologize for it, don't use it. Make sure that images fit the resolution of your screen in pixels. Most modern computer screens are 1024 x 768, so images that take up your entire slide should be around that size, too. Images that don't take up the entire slide should be downsized accordingly. If you search for images on the internet, you can use the search tool bar to search for images of a certain size. As always, online tutorials can help with this process.

8. **Do use relevant images.** Choose images that emphasize or complement your message. You don't have to have a visual on every slide, so don't feel forced to use them. Avoid stock or generic images. It's great to use visuals for humor, too, but you never want to use anything offensive or inappropriate for your audience.

9. **Don't overcomplicate.** Complicated charts and graphs are another sure way to lose your audience. Your graphics should support what you are saying, not overwhelm or confuse your audience. Don't take a chart or graph from a written report and simply copy and paste it on to your slide; rather, customize simple and compelling graphics for your presentation. The same rule applies here as for images: if you feel you have to apologize for it, don't use it.

10. **Do simplify.** Charts and graphs should be clean and simple with only a few variables. Explain your findings in your remarks and only use charts and graphs to illustrate your main point or conclusions. You don't need a chart for every aspect of your project.

11. **Don't overuse special effects.** Star wipes, fancy slide transitions, animated graphics, spinning text – these were all cool in the 1990s when PowerPoint was new, but now they are considered dated and unprofessional. If you must use effects, limit them to techniques like bringing up bullet points individually on a slide. Plus, a presentation loaded with special effects is more likely to run slowly, be incompatible with different versions of PowerPoint, or crash.
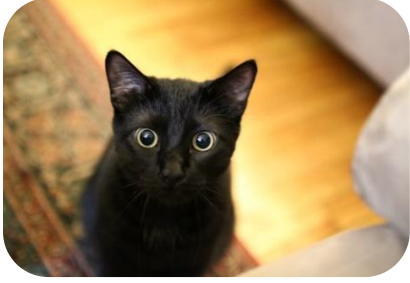
Keeping people's attention

Clean, professional, and simple slides are one of the best things you can do to keep your audience's attention, but even the best slides can't do it alone. Your job as the presenter is to engage your audience with these dos and don'ts.

1. **Don't read your slides.** This is the number one complaint about bad presentations. Reading your slides doesn't just bore your audience – it insults them. They know how to read and don't need you to do it for them. Reading your slides disengages you from your audience. Let your slides speak for themselves. Use just a few words or an image on a slide to emphasize your point and explain it in your own words.

2. **Do engage your audience.** Start your presentation with a hook that grabs people's attention. Try a surprising statistic, a personal anecdote, or even a shocking or alarming piece of information. They will want to know what comes next and will pay attention. If it's appropriate to your topic, use humor. An amusing fact or funny photo lets people know that this will not be another boring presentation. Ask your audience for a show of hands to yes or no questions. People are often reluctant to volunteer to answer open-ended questions, but most people are fine with raising their hand. You can even ask people to stand up instead of raising their hand. This engages people, makes them participants, and sets the mood.

3. **Don't read your notes.** This is just as bad as reading directly from your slides. Use presenter view on your computer so you (but not the audience) can see your notes, but don't bore your audience by keeping your eyes glued to your laptop. Look up from your notes, make eye contact with the audience (or focus on different points in the room), and be present.

4. **Do modulate your voice.** No one wants to listen to someone who speaks in a monotone. Vary your pitch, tone, and volume. Speak directly into the microphone so that everyone can hear. Make your tone conversational. You can be professional without being boring. It's okay to address the audience directly and talk to them like you are having a one-on-one conversation.

5. **Don't use too many slides.** You will lose your audience if you are flipping slides every few seconds. They will either disengage or start to feel like they are missing important information. A good rule of thumb is no more than two slides for every minute allotted to your presentation. Some slides will stay on the screen for more or less time than others, but the overall rule still holds. You don't want to find yourself skipping slides or rushing through them. Do a few dry-runs to get the timing and the number of slides right.
6. **Do move around.** Dynamic presenters are better at keeping audience attention. Don't be afraid to get out from behind the podium or to walk in front of the screen. Moving around keeps your audience focused on you and what you are saying. Keep moving to keep people interested.

Overcoming nerves

Almost everyone experiences nerves before a presentation – even veteran performers! Overcoming nerves only takes a few dos – and no don'ts.

1. **Do know your material.** The better you know your stuff, the less nervous you will be. This is your presentation, so you should know it backwards and forwards. Have good, thorough, easy-to-read presentation notes to fall back on if you find yourself stumbling. Remember, it's not a test! This is a chance for you to share your knowledge.
2. **Do rehearse.** The more you practice, the more at ease you will feel. Practice by yourself to gauge timing, decide when to move to the next slide, and to refine your remarks. Practice in the mirror to get used to looking up from your notes and making eye contact. Practice with a friend or colleague so she can tell you if you are talking too fast, cramming in too much, speaking too softly, or if any of your slides are confusing, overwhelming, or hard to see. Refine as needed, rehearse some more, and remember that practice doesn't make perfect; practice makes progress. Nothing is perfect!
3. **Do act confident.** No one but you knows you are nervous, so act like you are filled with confidence. Stand up straight, pull back your shoulders, hold your head high, make eye contact, speak loud and clear, and fake it 'til you make it.

4. **Do prepare for tech failure.** Have a backup plan in case something goes wrong. You should always be prepared to deliver your presentation without your slides if necessary. If you are prepared for that, it will help ease your nerves. Always bring a backup copy of your presentation, even if you emailed it to the organizers in advance. Be ready for potential software incompatibilities; sometimes the presentation laptop will have a different version of PowerPoint than the one you used to make your slides, which can cause your fonts to change or your effects to fail. If possible, show up early to test your presentation on the provided laptop. Having a contingency plan and being prepared will help you feel less nervous.

5. **Do remember you are the expert!** Yes, YOU are the expert. The audience is there to hear from you because you know your stuff. You already know more about your topic than the audience does, because this is your topic, your research, your specialty, and your expertise. It's okay to be nervous, but it's not okay to sell yourself short. Reminding yourself that you are in charge and that you are prepared, have a plan, and have everything under control can you calm your nerves.

6. **Do take a deep breath.** Before your presentation starts, take a nice, deep breath. Center yourself. Focus on why you are there and what you hope to accomplish. Then, breathe again, stride confidently on to the stage, and knock 'em dead!

Questions or comments? Feel free to contact me!
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