

(Don't Do) Death By PowerPoint

By Catherine Sanders Reach

Microsoft PowerPoint has a bad reputation. Edward Tufte, professor at Yale, bashed the software for elevating format over content.¹ However, whether you are making a pitch to a potential corporate client, preparing an opening statement, or giving a CLE talk, a visual presentation can go along with your verbal remarks to help engage your audience and reinforce your message. Following are some tips and suggestions for how to do it right.

Best practices

There are lessons to take away from Matt Homann's Conference PowerPoint Bingo.² If you strenuously avoid every item on the card, including overuse of bullets, reading the slides, and apologizing for a chart or table being too small to read, you will immediately improve your visual presentation game.

Slides should use images and words that help you make your point clearly and quickly:

- Keep it simple and minimal.
- Assume bad lighting or low contrast.

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- If you use animation, then practice, practice, practice with it.
- Avoid lots of words (use images instead).
- Use high-resolution graphics and avoid clip art.
- Learn to use Microsoft Office's WordArt, SmartCharts, Drawing Tools, and Picture Tools.
- If you must use charts, use them appropriately. It may be more powerful to call out a specific number rather than display a chart that is difficult to read or decipher.
- Pick only one font; if you must have a second font, use it sparingly and only for emphasis.

Your style

While there are plenty of other visual presentation tools to experiment with, including Prezi, Keynote, or Haiku Deck,³ most lawyers have access to Microsoft's PowerPoint and have some idea how to use it. Office 365 suggests layouts when you add an image and makes your slides immediately look better.⁴ However, it is distracting if a slide presentation is built in an older version of PowerPoint because the themes and design styles have been used and seen by millions. If you have an old version of PowerPoint (pre-Office 2016), consider building your deck in Google Slides (free), which provides fresh templates and design.⁵ If your firm's standard slide template is outdated, consider creating a new one with the help of a graphic artist so that the presentation is not marred by a stale template.

It is suggested that you have only one major point per slide. This is merely a suggestion, however. A slide should help focus on a theme or a single concept, but it may

have many points. It depends on the purpose of your presentation and other factors.

Finding images

In addition to the images available through PowerPoint in Office 365, here are some additional resources for free, high-quality stock photos or DIY images:

- Unsplash (<https://unsplash.com/>): Free, high-resolution photos; no attribution is necessary.
- StockSnap (<https://stocksnap.io/>): Free stock photos; no attribution or copyright.
- MorgueFile (<https://morguefile.com/>): A free photo archive of high-resolution stock photos. In some cases, photographers request attribution, so check the details for the image. Editing is usually allowed.
- Snagit (<https://www.techsmith.com/screen-capture.html>): Capture screenshots and anything you see on your screen, annotate, and save in an image library; \$50 for a single user.
- Google Image Search (http://www.google.com/advanced_image_search): You can find anything on Google, but watch for copyright permissions. Even under "educational," if your slides are made into handouts, sold as CLE materials, or made public on the web, consider what is fair use. Filter by usage rights and choose "free to use, share or modify, even commercially." Then double-check.

Be prepared

The more technology you use, the more potential failure points.

- Make sure you have your own VGA and HDMI adapters, especially if you use a Mac.
- If you are depending on a Wi-Fi network you've never used, be prepared for an alternative. In fact, be prepared for an alternative even if it is a Wi-Fi network you've used repeatedly. It is always better to have a copy of your slides downloaded locally on the device.
- If you are going to bring in wireless presentation technology like an Apple TV, Google Nexus Player, or Roku, expect to be the only person who knows how it works—don't depend on IT help.
- Ask ahead about the room setup; your use of presenter view for your notes may be thwarted if the display computer is on the other side of the room.
- Need access to the projector's USB port? It might be mounted on a 14-foot ceiling.
- Let your hosts know in advance what you would like to do and ask what is possible to do. Find out what is best for the audience in terms of sightlines and audio quality—then adjust accordingly and show up early, prepared to adjust yet again.

Despite how well you plan, there will be glitches and emergencies. Expect your projector to fail, your screen to fall, your laptop to fry, the power to be off, and the roof to cave in. At best, assume limited or no internet, poor sight lines, low lumens, and no audio line in for video/audio playback over speakers:

- Make sure you can do your presentation without slides or visuals. If visuals are necessary, provide them as handouts in advance. And take a copy of your slides, in print, with you—or at least on your tablet.
- Do not rest your entire presentation on the ability to play a YouTube video.
- Bring backups of everything; have another laptop, email the slides to yourself and your host, have them on a thumb drive, and store them in the cloud.

- Show up early (really early). Test everything and be ready to adjust accordingly.

Takeaways

Audiences often ask for a copy of the slides before and after a presentation. Even though you turned in a 40-page paper, the audience still wants the easy-to-digest slide-deck version. To find a compromise between supplying the “Cliff's Notes” version of your talk and keeping your slides appropriately image-driven, you can add notes, links, bulleted lists, and useful information in the notes area of your slides and distribute the presentation as a PDF. For a CLE presentation, here's how:

- Once you have completed the slide deck in PowerPoint, save the slides as a handout. (In PowerPoint 2016, go to File > Export > Create Handouts > Create Handouts in Word > Notes Below Slides.)
- When the slides are in Word, add or edit bulleted lists, hyperlinks, and more using formatting options you don't have in the PowerPoint notes area.
- Finalize your notes, save the file to PDF, and voila—your notes appear below the slides, the audience can follow along, and everyone has what they want.

For a corporate audience, you can also save your presentation, with narration, as a video.⁶ Or, to enhance client instructions, incorporate timeline add-ons⁷ or create your own infographic⁸ so that it is easy to read and understand at a glance.

Conclusion

Practice makes perfect. Microsoft is even building an artificial intelligence Presenter Coach⁹ to help provide feedback in PowerPoint rehearsal mode. Presentation technology has come a long way. “Death by PowerPoint” should be a thing of the past. Use visual and audio aids to enhance your message—not detract from it. In addition to having a well-organized and thoughtful presentation, keep best practices in mind as you prepare and use slide decks and other presentation tools. ■

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ENDNOTES

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