

Tips for PowerPoint Slides

Whether you are using PowerPoint, Google Slides, Prezi, Canva, or some other slide deck platform, you can make your oral presentation as strong as it can be by applying some best practices in slide design and use.

Slides should serve the audience, not the speaker

Slide presentations usually are most effective when designed mainly to help the audience understand what the speaker is saying. Accordingly, speakers should not use slides like a teleprompter, filling each slide with talking points that are read to an audience. When you sit down to make your slide deck, avoid the “teleprompter temptation” by asking yourself what the *audience* will need to see in order for them to make sense of what you are saying. Slides are for audiences, not for speakers.

Use text sparingly

Think of slides as visual aids instead of containers for text. While you cannot eliminate all text from your slides, you should avoid slides that require the audience to read while you are talking. Key terms, concepts, and phrases on your slides will be helpful as you speak, but for general purposes, the most effective visual aids will not contain long passages of text. Slides that require reading divert your audience’s attention away from what you’re saying and that way undermine your audience’s capacity to focus. In place of text, look for opportunities to feature an image, picture, or graphic element that emphasizes a key point you want to make. Doing so will encourage audience members to participate by visualizing in their minds what you are saying.

Go easy on the graphics

Unless there is a strategic reason to not do so, keep your slides simple, clean, and sparse. Stay away from flashy or “busy” slide templates. Guard against the temptation to decorate your slides with visual content unrelated to your objective of helping the audience understand what you are saying, and don’t use pictures as background for

text if doing so makes it hard for audience members to discern the text. A thoughtfully chosen and well-placed image can do wonders for audience comprehension, so take time to source images, photographs, and graphics that promote insight and boost your credibility with the audience. Low-resolution images, clip art, repetitive gif animations, and outdated font styles all are potential distractions from the spoken word. Avoid visual clutter, as empty space can be an effective communication device.

Use bullet points only if necessary

The job for each slide is to focus your audience's attention on something specific. But bullet lists, because they separate items into a series, have no single point of focus. Whenever it is appropriate to present information in numerical sequence or a linear series of steps, consider the advantages of making one slide for each item in the series instead of displaying all items at once in list form. For an audience to understand that information is related sequentially, use descriptive slide headings and your spoken words to establish the sequence. Whenever possible, your audience should understand from your spoken words when and how one piece of information is related to another. Don't rely too much on bullet point formatting to convey those relationships for you.

Maintain a consistent design theme

Unless there is a strategic reason for variation, all slides in your deck should follow consistent layouts, fonts, colors, and styles. Sticking with a consistent pattern helps to establish a sense of continuity and coherence to what you are saying. Otherwise, when slides are unrelated visually, your audience may lose track of the thread in your presentation. This happens to audiences because variation in slide theme creates a visual puzzle for them to solve. Instead of listening to you they may be trying to figure out how one slide is connected to another.

Brush up on basic principles of effective design

Just as there are basic principles for effective writing and speaking, there are basic principles for effective visual communication. The most basic principle is this: information does not speak for itself. In other words, how information is presented to an

audience will impact how that information is interpreted *by* an audience. Slide design isn't something extra added to slide content, since any and all content must be designed in some style or another. This means that slide design steers how an audience perceives the presentation. For this reason, an effective speaker will not ignore or dismiss the impact that visual design has on an audience. Fortunately, [basic graphic design principles](#) are easy to apply once you understand what they are and how they work.