

PowerPoint Crimes: Presentation Guidance from a Charisma-Challenged Geriatric Professor¹

by

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At a Marketing & Public Policy conference, a friend told me he disliked most sessions. The focus on PowerPoint made them boring to the point of distraction, while failing to focus on the research. But the problem goes beyond that meeting as three crucial-yet-inter-related rules for mass communications tend to be forgotten or ignored in too many presentations.

For the readers' education, here are those rules along with the too-common practices that guarantee a boring presentation. All business students, plus too many faculty and business professionals, frequently violate these rules resulting audience attention going elsewhere.²

Rule #1: 1P>10³W

P=picture; W=words

“One picture is greater than 1000 words.”

This common maxim says that your slides are the illustrations. As illustrations, they should not be filled with words. You want the audience to listen to what you are saying instead of being distracted by reading. If someone can just read your slides and know everything you said, you wasted everyone's time with a face-to-face meeting. If someone can listen from the next room and know your entire presentation, you wasted your time making slides. If you have too many words on screen, the audience will be reading instead of listening.

Use words to help your illustrations, not distract from them.³

Consider outdoor advertising. Everyone has driven past a billboard, maybe the same billboard multiple times, and had no idea what it was selling. Too many words. Too small a font. Too much to be read in the short time the display is visible. Common textbook guidance states that seven words are optimal for good outdoor displays that should depend on illustrations to carry the message. The more you try to say, the less you convey. With billboards, people are driving past and (we hope) they are paying attention to traffic. For your presentation, the audience should be hearing your message, not distracted by reading. Depending on too many words, the audience would read ahead of your talk, figure there is nothing extra, then turn their attention elsewhere.

I don't claim to have created this formula. And maybe the long-forgotten presentation where I discovered it got it from someone else. And yet, seeing it for the first time with a bunch of journalists and people

¹ This is drawn from a presentation prepared-but-never-shown to new instructor orientations or doctoral student symposia. The presentation's expanded long form is available as a storyboard at <http://webhome.auburn.edu/~rotfehj/PowerPointCrimes.pdf>

² This is tangentially related to the problem of PowerPoint as the “Kudzu of Modern Communications,” where people spend more time making meaningless slides instead of actually doing anything important. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/may/30/microsoft-power-point>

³ This concept also applies to making a better research poster. Attempts to cram an entire research paper onto a poster makes it more likely that fewer people would stop by to talk with the researcher. For example, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYk29tnxASs>

with communications degrees, we all laughed. Ingenious, we thought. Coming home, I eagerly showed it to an Engineering professor. To my surprise, instead of laughing my friend said "It's wrong" as he wrote the "correct" formula with these letters that I learned meant something specific in his work that is different than pictures and words. That brings me to the second rule.

Rule #2: U ≠ TA

U=you; TA=target audience

"You are not the target audience."

It means that you can't assume. What is obvious to you might not be to them. What you think is a killer joke can fall flat. Even sex appeals or who looks sexy are not a consistent universal value.

This rule is often misunderstood. It is not what has to be simplified, bowdlerized or needing a *vulgarectomy*.⁴ It is not just an issue of age or gender or other demographic differences, though they do matter. Nor can this be reduced to a matter of potentially offending someone, because that is almost unavoidable. As you travel to different parts of the country or the world, unexpected differences will surprise you. As you get older, you will discover simple terms or phrases acquire unexpected, potentially offensive, additional meanings as younger members of the audience giggle that you said it. That is why many syllabi now include a variety of trigger warnings.⁵

The key is empathy, not ethnocentrism.

As a simple example of ignoring the audience is the gratuitous name dropping, with citations in their slides saying only "Larry, Darryl and Darryl (1990)." With that limited notation, few would know what they reference. Those familiar with the topic don't need them. Those unfamiliar would just be perplexed, unless the presentation includes a full reference list handout for everyone (which no one ever does).

At a more basic level, what looks great on your computer monitor might fail when projected on a screen. Most likely, anything smaller than 36 point type would not be readable to anyone beyond the first two rows, even though 18 point sans serif is the default PowerPoint font for text. Web designers still have not caught on that many of their site visitors will come in by a mix of computers, tablets or phones. Advertising agencies usually show their work to clients on state-of-the-art extra-large screens that dominate the room, ignoring that significant parts of their audiences will be watching on something older or smaller.

A part of this includes a recognition that being different is not a negative value. Hence the third rule.

Rule #3: NU ≠ D

NU=Not You; D=dunce

"Being different from you doesn't mean audience members are dunces."

Ignoring this last rule leads to some of the worst, most boring presentations in existence. And the reason people don't attend sessions at conferences, or when attending, they're doing something else.

⁴ It is doubtful that anyone's presentation would plan to use offensive expletives unrelated to the literal meaning of the words. <https://www.ama.org/listings/2022/06/26/indecent-words-and-advertising>

⁵ For example, see http://webhome.auburn.edu/~rotfehj/Rotfeld%27s_syllabi_boiler-plate_statements.pdf

Maybe it would help if you spent a minute remembering what it was like as a student, taking a course, sitting in a classroom during a lecture. You probably had a class where: *Every day, the instructor would show a series of word-filled slides, and every line of each slide would be read out loud. At worst, many slides were in the book. Attendance was part of the grade, so you came to class, using the period to keep up with your friends' messages or shop online.*

I am certain than anyone who attended a college or university in the past twenty years had a class like that. Even before PowerPoint, instructors could do it with transparencies. I am equally certain that no student in a class like that ever asked the teacher: *Why do you think we can't read?*

To be pragmatic, how does anyone in those classes stay awake? It is perplexing that anyone who had this experience considers doing the same thing in their own presentations.⁶

Don't. Do. That. [Duh!]

For an interesting presentation, presume audience intelligence. Don't make your slides the script. Don't read slides out loud. If you must have a slide with words, be terse. Your audiences won't be illiterate, or so I hope. Don't read to the audience as if they are children at bedtime.

This has been, and continues to be, my single greatest hatred of many speakers' presentations.

I attended too many meetings with business executives where word-heavy slides were read line by line, slides that might have been available in advance of the meeting, maybe along with a written report which the slides summarized. At many meetings of my University Senate, these frequent presentations are made to the room full of faculty and administrators holding multiple advanced degrees, representing many millions of dollars collective salary value, who all had better things to do with their time than have information read to them.

I found this practice to hit a peak of insulting when a speaker at a Marketing & Public Policy conference apparently thought we'd not know which words he was reading as his hand-held laser pointer bounced on each word while he read them. Unfortunately, that presentation was only the first time I witnessed this insult to collective intelligence, enduring several repeats of that experience in the years to follow.

It is a given that some people in the audience might not be as interested in the topic as you. There is no doubt that they don't have your knowledge level. After all, that's why you are making a presentation. However, that doesn't make the audience a collection of deranged, dim-witted, mentally deficient dunces.

The people at your presentation are not idiots, but you are one if you feel a need to read to them.

[And so I end](#)

It is a safe bet that everyone reading this has witnessed presentations guilty of all of the bad practices I've described here. You should follow the same pattern for your presentations only if you personally found those experiences interesting and not a time to check for messages on your phone.

⁶ From the Department of Accidental Entertainment. Today, many classrooms have monitors in the rear that mirror the main display, allowing presenters to see what image is live. According to some Management students' social media, their instructor repeatedly squinted and sometimes stumbled into the front row seats trying to read his slides from the rear monitor. This went for several semesters without the professor ever seeing some of his students' posted short videos. When seeing the posts, the ineluctable question is what level of laziness in preparation resulted in a senior faculty member's need to read the slides' details in order to know what to say.