

Using PowerPoint*

By

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PowerPoint can be an effective tool for highlighting key points in a presentation and maintaining audience attention. The program can support interactive learning, if used carefully.

Since the main goal of an active learning approach is to engage participants in their acquisition of knowledge, PowerPoint presentations can raise questions that encourage attendees to make connections between presented material and their personal experiences and observations. The presenter can do this by keeping information on the screen to a minimum in order to allow time to pause in the presentation and invite input from attendees. In this context, PowerPoint can be considered as a replacement for a blackboard or whiteboard. It is another method of delivery that provides smoother delivery due to the ease of progressing through the presentation with just a mouse click rather than stopping to write on a board and then erase the material to add more. A well-designed slide can bring more clarity than the presenter's poor handwriting or lack of illustration. It is also possible to go back to earlier slides in the midst of discussion.

PowerPoint is also useful for visual learners or those who have learning disabilities. Most presenters do not write on a board often enough for these learners.

The following suggestions are designed to utilize the benefits of the software to achieve the maximum impact for participants.

- **Learn the technology.** Read the manual or go through a tutorial. Search the internet for ideas and pay attention to good PowerPoint presentations you have attended.
- **Keep bullets to a minimum** in both length and number. Brevity and simple animation (see the next point) helps to focus audience attention. Wordy, dense slides are probably the most common errors that presenters make.
- **Animate the bullets** or lines of text so they are introduced one at a time. A large amount of text on the screen can overwhelm viewers and cause them to lose interest. Avoid animated options due to their distraction from the message or only use them for an added emphasis on a rare point. Simple, effective animation can be used by highlighting each line of text and clicking on "add effect," then "entrance," and then "appear."
- **Choose large fonts** (e.g., 36-point Arial). Bold can be used for emphasis. Never use smaller than 20-point font because it cannot be read in the back of a small room!
- **Use a simple, eye-pleasing background.** Explore the "background fill" section of the program to find light colored textures. A dark background with white lettering cannot be read by many people and handouts often do not reproduce well.
- **Use pictures selectively.** Too many illustrations can be distracting. Clip art that has been used too frequently can make the presentation look trite. A few images can help to emphasize and clarify major points and provide visual interest.
- **During delivery, pause with the presentation of each bullet.** Provide verbal illustration of the point with examples, a definition, explanations, or further information. Ask the audience for additional examples or comments, if appropriate.
- **Include questions for the audience.** Questions allow the presenter to pause and engage the audience in application of concepts to their current or future experiences.
- **Use handouts with forethought.** Some people recommend distributing handouts at the end of a presentation in order to encourage note-taking. They might also recommend not having slides pre-loaded on a website. However, many people write notes on handouts. A comment to encourage note-taking at the beginning of the presentation is helpful. Many attendees learn best when writing down information. Note-taking also will occur naturally if the presenter has additional information that is not printed word-for-word on the slides!

*Adapted from: Cousineau, M., "PowerPoint: To use or not to use?" *Footnotes, American Sociological Association*, March, 2009, p. 4