

A lot of people really hate PowerPoint.

PowerPoint has been blamed for crimes ranging from boardroom boredom to engineering disasters. Some believe PowerPoint is inherently nasty and evil, fostering a mode of thinking and communicating that gives the impression of clarity and precision while hiding error and confusion.

Yet, nobody blames Excel for a flawed business plan, misleading sales forecast or an illegible chart. Is Word responsible for a confusing report or an illiterate press release?

I'll probably return to this subject in later posts. For now, here are a couple of observations about PowerPoint and presentations:

- Sometimes, you shouldn't give a presentation. Sometimes, an informal meeting may be a better choice than a formal PowerPoint presentation scenario. The familiar presentation setting with a speaker standing in front of the room with a projector and screen (maybe even a podium) does not always promote free discussion.

For very complex subject matter, distributing a complete report for the audience to study individually, followed by discussions, is probably better than a presentation.

- Even in appropriate situations, PowerPoint is usually used badly. You can find bad presentations everywhere (as well as all sorts of advice on improving them). In my experience as a consultant, I have noticed that most executives agree immediately that their sales presentations are poor.

I will add to the profusion of advice on improving presentations in later posts. For now, let me entertain you with my thoughts on why PowerPoint is used so badly.

The problem, of course, is with the user of the tool, not the tool itself. Even though PowerPoint has been accused of seducing users into bad practices, I will assume that you, dear reader, are less pliant than this.

For most people, PowerPoint is the first tool they encounter with any sort of usable visual capability. It's easy to move text and other objects around the slide, insert clip art or photos, play with color, insert sounds, and even make things appear, disappear and fly! This stuff is obviously way more fun than actually thinking about building a coherent, engaging presentation.

So, here is what's wrong with PowerPoint users:

### **1. Users fail to understand the role of PowerPoint in a presentation.**

Let's start with what a PowerPoint "deck" is not.

It is, first and foremost, not a document meant to be read. The presentation situation is obviously not the same as someone reading a book. If you make your slides like pages in a book (with paragraphs and sentences) it will be read, either by the audience or by you (or both). If the audience reads it, why are you there? If you read it to your audience, you insult and bore them. And some studies show that if you and the audience read it at the same time, your audience will actually cease to pay attention at all.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the PowerPoint file is not even the whole story. A good presenter uses PowerPoint to highlight his message, make it memorable, and to visually explain complexities. A good way to tell if a PowerPoint file is on the right track is that it is virtually useless without the presenter.

You may be haunted by the expectation that you will be asked to provide a "handout" or a "leave-behind" or someone may ask for a "copy of your presentation." Resist this politely but firmly and offer a separate, carefully written and illustrated document instead. Then, people may have a better chance of getting your message (including those who did not have the pleasure of experiencing your presentation).

If ignorant conference planners insist on "publishing your presentation" you should offer your carefully prepared document in PowerPoint format.

The PowerPoint presentation is also not an outline to help you keep your place; you should know your material better than that. And, if you do need an outline, why show it to the audience?

There is value in providing agendas and other signposts in long presentations but this is for the audience's benefit, not yours.

But, if a presentation is not these things, what is it? I have not been able find a better description for the role of the presentation than the admittedly old-fashioned "visual aid." It is an aid to you, the presenter, and your audience, while you deliver your message. Note that it is not the message itself; this is your responsibility. And it is visual, which gives it great power, if used properly.

### **2. Users fail to focus on the audience.**

Many of the problems with presentations can be traced back to this simple failure. Here are a couple of observations.

No matter how smart you think you are, or how much you know, or how hard you've worked on your project, or who you know, or how funny you think you are, the presentation is not about you. Some people are incapable of understanding this – let's try again: it's not about you.

What the presentation is about is getting the audience to do what you want them to do. Everything else is crap.

Even simple legibility is a problem. I am continually astounded by presentation content that just can't be seen by most of the audience. How does the presenter expect people to understand material they can't see? The presenter has simply failed to imagine himself in a seat in the presentation venue.

I once worked for a CEO who had this problem. I explained it to myself by noting that he was formerly a fighter pilot. In retrospect, I'm not sure whether I meant that he had excellent eyesight or a somewhat enlarged ego.

### **3. Users are incapable of editing.**

By editing, I mean delete, mostly.

This is not unrelated to the previous point – it's a matter of ego. Not all your thoughts and words are golden, or even relevant. Not every chart is excellent. Bald repetition is boring. You don't want elaborate prose. Those cute animations and clipart are distracting, if not embarrassing.

Sam Johnson<sup>2</sup>, who was not short in the ego department, has good advice:

Read your own compositions, and when you meet a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.

Now this ain't easy. Good writers will tell you that editing is bloody difficult. You will need to painfully scrape and chip away, over and over again. This also takes a lot of time. Don't create your presentation on the plane on the way to the meeting, no matter how confident you are.

A final favorite quote is Pascal's<sup>3</sup> apology for the length of a letter:

The present letter is a very long one, simply because I had no time to make it shorter.

So there it is, gentle reader: all this trouble with PowerPoint is really you.

Please try to do better in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> John Sweller, a researcher from the University of New South Wales, has developed a framework called cognitive load theory. Sweller believes that verbalizing information and presenting it visually is ineffective because the audience's attention is split between the two.

On the other hand, recent Ford F150 television commercials do precisely that. You decide.

For more on Sweller, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Sweller](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Sweller).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Johnson (1709 - 1784) was an English author and the subject of a famous biography by James Boswell.

See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel\\_Johnson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Johnson).

<sup>3</sup> Blaise Pascal (1623 - 1662) was a French mathematician, physicist, and religious philosopher.

See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blaise\\_Pascal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blaise_Pascal).