



Drafting Effective PowerPoint Slides

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Attorneys quite often draft PowerPoint slides to accompany a continuing legal education or other legal presentation. Sometimes the slides are a success – they appeal to visual learners, give the presentation a polished feel, or help synthesize and organize information. But other times they are unhelpful – perhaps they cannot be seen or lull the listener into a false sense of understanding. Worse yet, they are sometimes even distracting, such as when they cause the presenter to turn away from the audience or when the presenter merely reads from the slides. For a particularly disastrous and humorous example, see this clip, http://www.i-am-bored.com/bored_link.cfm?link_id=23724, called “Life after Death by PowerPoint.”

Giving a successful presentation involves many skills, but foremost among these is maintaining the audience’s focus on you, the presenter. A guiding principle when drafting slides is to ensure that they will encourage the audience to engage with you rather than distract the audience. PowerPoint is merely a tool you use to help you achieve your goal: to educate the audience about the topic on which you are presenting. The following describe some key considerations when drafting PowerPoint slides, such as the appropriate amount of text, the presentation of the text, incorporation of visuals, the formatting of the slides, and the pacing of the slides.

Too Much Text. Your slides should emphasize the point that you are trying to make, not distract from it. If textual sentences and large amounts of information are contained on each slide, listeners tend to either read the slides

instead of listening to you or to listen to you without looking at the slides. Worse yet, in some cases, listeners may try to listen and read at the same time resulting in a lower comprehension of both the verbal and written material. Thus, using short phrases and short lists, or chunks, of information will best enhance the verbal presentation. Less is more.

Block Quotes. Even so, sometimes including large blocks of text, such as displaying a key quotation from a case or the language of a statute, is appropriate. This works best when you want the audience to study the text and interact with you about it. The focus of the presentation at this point is the language on the slide. In this case, you would stop speaking and permit the audience to read the information and critically assess it. This allows the audience to focus on the slide and not be distracted by you talking. Afterward, you can engage the audience in a discussion of the text. This enhances the presentation by permitting learning by doing.

Presentation of Text. Good presentation of text involves issues such as the selection of font, the use of proper grammar and spelling, and the avoidance of typographical errors. Emphasis and spacing also enhance the effectiveness of the text. Generally, use larger text and a darker sans serif font for headings and main ideas, and highlight key text by bolding it. Pay attention to spacing, making sure that the text does not become crowded.¹ Finally, make sure to proofread the slides before the presentation in the same manner you would proofread any written document.²

Incorporation of Visuals. Learning styles vary between individuals; some

are more auditory, others more visual. Graphics, such as diagrams, pictures, and symbols, can enhance the comprehension of visual learners. Consider using diagrams or charts to vary the form of the material presented. Also consider using simple symbols, such as “Ø” or “≠,” rather than words, such as “not,” to appeal to visual learners. Including images and photos can also engage the audience, particularly if you are talking about something that can be pictured.

However, keep it simple. Having too many graphics, or visuals that cannot be seen from a distance, is distracting. Also, avoid running a photographic or pictorial slide show while you are speaking. This leads the audience to view the show rather than listen to the presenter. If you have something that might interest your audience but is not directly related to the presentation, consider showing it before or after the presentation.³

Slide Formatting. Often presenters use a preset background graphic supplied in the program, and stick to it throughout the presentation. Unfortunately, this can cause the presentation to become visually monotonous or even distracting. Use single color backgrounds, and perhaps vary the colors between slides. Consider varying the font colors as well. The changes lead the viewer to remain more alert and to question the text and perhaps the material and presenter.

Alternatively, some experts recommend simply using black text on white background. This is more likely to focus the readers on the text and permit them to quickly refocus on the verbal presen-


tation. It has the added benefit of being visible, in particular to the color blind.

Using different slide layouts can also help avoid monotony. Move the title bar around, or present information in columns. Avoid the constant use of bullets. Bullets are for lists; if the information is not a list of items, it should not be bulleted.

Pacing. When drafting your slides, keep in mind that the number of slides should correspond to the length and type of the presentation. Slides are most effective when you will be discussing several large-scale discrete points in a set order, one slide for each point. Advance the slides when you move to the next significant point, which can

help keep the audience engaged. Avoid skipping slides or taking up points in a different order than the slides. If your presentation will be very free-flowing, consider limiting your use of PowerPoint, or not using it at all. The time you would spend drafting the slides might be better spent on practicing the presentation.

Once you have mastered the basics of PowerPoint slide drafting, such as choosing and presenting your text, formatting your slides, and incorporating appropriate visuals, you can experiment with more advanced means to use your slides to promote interaction with your audience. For instance, you can use the animation function's fade or fly in feature. This feature permits you to present text on the same slide at different times. You might post a problem on a slide and then challenge the audience to work through and solve it. Once they have done so, you can present your own answer below the problem on the same slide. Or, you might consider using a "clicker," which

will permit you to walk around and engage the audience in discussion rather than needing to remain close to the computer to advance the slides. The creative ways to use PowerPoint are as varied as the topics on which you might present. So start drafting your slides, while always keeping in mind that the slides should not detract from, but rather should enhance, your presentation. 

ENDNOTES

1. See Ruth Ann Robbins, *Painting with Print: Incorporating Concepts of Typographic and Layout Design into the Text of Legal Writing Documents*, 2 J. ASS'N LEGAL WRITING DIRECTORS 108, 119, 124, 127 (2004).
2. See Ariana R. Levinson, *Editing Tips for the Busy Attorney*, KENTUCKY BENCH & BAR, at 31 (Nov. 2007).
3. For instance, one professor ran the above-referenced clip before her PowerPoint presentation.

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