

A Checklist for Professional PowerPoint Slides

By Norman M. Goldfarb

Old-timers say that, back in the day, speakers did not use PowerPoint slides. This claim may be just another tall tale, like students walking to school, but PowerPoint slides can certainly make or break a speaker at today's professional meetings.¹

If your slides are well-prepared, your audience will assume that you know your topic. In contrast, unprofessional slides communicate incompetence and, even worse, a lack of respect for your audience.

Good slides support your verbal – and non-verbal – communications; they do not attempt to replace you on the podium. You cannot hide behind them. Your audience cannot watch and listen to you while they are reading your slides. If you want their attention, keep your slides simple. Your slides are not your script; do not read them. The implication is that you probably need to practice your presentation (and confirm that your slides work as planned). Your slides cannot be both effective visual aids and standalone take-home materials; you need two documents for two purposes. If your slides look like eye charts, you may be in the wrong profession.

Use the following checklist to ensure that your slides support your credibility and your presentation.

PowerPoint Slide Check List

Content

- Slides flow smoothly and logically.
- Each slide communicates one idea.
- There is time (excluding Q&A) for at least one, and preferably three, minutes per slide.
- There is a title slide that is repeated at the end.
- There is an introductory agenda slide.
- There is a conclusion slide.
- Citations and references are on the bottom of slides or on a slide at the end.
- There is no redundant material.
- There is no off-topic or low-priority material.
- There are no slides that you plan to skip. It wastes time passing through the unused slides, it confuses and irritates the audience, it makes it more difficult to manage your time, and it incurs unnecessary printing costs.
- Slides are numbered so attendees can find them more easily.
- Your name and contact information are on the first and last slide (unless you want to remain anonymous or not be contacted).

Design & Formatting

- Slide design is professional, simple, uncluttered and does not call attention to itself.
- Backgrounds do not interfere with legibility of text. White or dark blue are best.

- Template is professional and not overused. Many free templates are available on the Internet.
- Color scheme is pleasing and provides high-contrast for text.
- Layout is simple and consistent from slide to slide. Use PowerPoint slide masters.
- Design includes ample white space. Margins are important.

Text

- Slide titles communicate key points, e.g., replace “Influencing Subjects” with “Do Not Coerce Subjects.”
- Text is concise, using bulleted phrases rather than complete sentences. Preferably, there should be no more than 30 words in six bulleted lines per slide. If you feel compelled to use a large block of text, highlight key phrases.
- Text is easy-to-read, using large, sans-serif fonts without italics or all-caps, in a color that contrasts strongly against the background.
- Text is consistent and conservative in its use of capitalization, bold fonts, underlining, color highlighting, and font styles (maximum of two).
- Construction is parallel, e.g., in use of pronouns and verbs.
- Words are interesting, e.g., “grasp” rather than “have.”
- Verbs are active, not passive, e.g., “Check spelling” instead of “Spelling should be checked.”
- Formatting of dates and numbers is consistent.
- There are no typos. Use PowerPoint’s spellchecking feature.

Charts and Tables

- Charts and tables are readable, uncluttered and professional.
- Charts and tables are clearly titled and labeled.
- Data sources are cited.
- The chart style is the best available to communicate the message.
- Charts with two-dimensional data are two-dimensional.
- Tables have very few rows and columns, to accommodate text that is readable.
- Where possible, charts are used instead of tables.
- Chart and table formats are consistent across slides.

Images & Animation

- Some, but probably not all, slides include images.
- Images reinforce the primary message of the text.
- Images are high-quality, not tired, glitzy, cheesy, weird, sloppy or low-resolution.
- Animations and transitions are kept simple and used sparingly, e.g., to reveal the answer to a question.
- Audio and video segments work correctly before your presentation begins.

Reference

1. "Live Long and Prosper: 16 Tips for Successful Public Speaking", Norman M. Goldfarb, Journal of Clinical Research Best Practices, October 2005

Author

Norman M. Goldfarb is Managing Director of First Clinical Research LLC, a provider of clinical research best practices information, consulting and training services. Contact him at 1.650.465.0119 or ngoldfarb@firstclinical.com.