

Writing for PowerPoint, or 'How not to bore your audience to death'

There are 300 million* PowerPoint users worldwide. There are 30 million* PowerPoint presentations happening daily. About a million* right now, as you read this. And at least 50% of those (but probably more) are unbearable. In short, 500 000 audiences wish the boardroom ceiling would fall on them. Or on the speaker.

 By [Tiffany Markman](#) 19 Jul 2012

This is a shame because PowerPoint is a great tool, when used properly. It's a visual medium to communicate with human beings, who are visual creatures. So let's look at how to write better slide copy, starting with how PowerPoint goes horribly wrong:

1. Too much copy

Too much copy on a slide makes it look like hard work. You may read the first line and, if you're feeling generous, the second. You may even skip to the end, to find a conclusion. But that's it. So why have a slide like this in your presentation...? Dunno.

Solutions:

- Forget all the other rules anyone else has ever taught you about PowerPoint.
- Forget '7 lines per slide, 7 words per line'. Aim for 7-15 words, total. Max.
- Don't be afraid to use multiple slides to break up a big (or important) point.
- Use only 3-4 reasons to support any single point you make. No more.
- Know your sh!t. That way, you won't have to remain glued to your slides.

2. Wordiness and waffle

Redundancy is the needless repetition of words, phrases, sentences or ideas. It's a problem in PowerPoint because it turns a half-way decent presentation into:

- A data dump
- A hand-out
- A teleprompter

But that's not what PowerPoint is for. (It's what Word is for. And the two are very different.) PowerPoint is intended to support the speaker. Not the other way round.

Solutions:

- What's the point of the slide? Say it once. Delete everything else. Move on.
- Even if what you're saying isn't interesting, and can't be made interesting, the least you can do is make the presentation interesting, by using a narrative structure.
- Think about a series of streetpole ads. Write as if you were writing for those.
- Create two presentations. One for your audience (the short, impressive one) and one for later reference (the longer, more detailed one, i.e. the hand-out).

3. Lazy formatting

A common mistake in business PowerPoint presentations is taking a (long, boring, wordy) document, converting it in a bulleted list of (long, boring, wordy) points, adding some TextArt, transitions or animations, and calling that a presentation.

Solutions:

- Be aware that a block with 20 points on it is a *poster*. Not a *slide*.
- If you're going to bullet, number or format text (using **bold**, *italics*,

FONT CHANGES

, **colour**, etc) keep it simple: two fonts and 2-3 colours, max.

- Avoid cheesy bullet images. No exceptions. Stick with dots or dashes.
- Avoid outline bulleting. It's a Word function that doesn't translate.
- Keep points short. People can't focus on more than one message at a time.

4. Text over images

People are visual creatures, as I've said, and PowerPoint is a visual medium. Also, images are more memorable. So why use a long heavy paragraph, like this one:

Your value proposition must be relevant to your target market. This means your target market must be clearly defined, so your prospects know you're talking to them. If you do this, you'll be able to focus on your prey, corner it, catch it and do with it what you will. It's like a cat chasing a mouse. He has to see the mouse first.

...when you could just show a lovely full-slide image of a cat chasing a mouse?

Solutions:

- There are nice places on the Internet to find good-quality, royalty-free images for presentations. [Google Image](#) is my favourite.
- Be brave in your choices and creative in your search terms.
- Always, always cite the artist (photographer, illustrator, designer, etc) as well as the place you found the image unless the image is clearly referred to as 'creative commons'. Otherwise you're just a horrible person.

Good luck. Yes, it takes a bit of time to create better copy for your presentations. And yes, you've barely got enough time your life as it is. But better copy means better message delivery, which means better convincing, which means better results - and good results typically yield more money, more success and more happiness, right? **So ultimately, if you write better slide copy, you'll be a happier individual.**

* Alexei Kapterev, 'Death by PowerPoint'

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

The above is an extract from Tiffany Markman's new PowerPoint training programme. It has a dual focus: a) writing more compelling PowerPoint copy and b) easy design tips and tricks to help normal people to create killer presentations. It can be run in-house as a corporate training offering, over a day or two days, and customised to accommodate the company's PowerPoint template, if there is one. This is a must-attend. Email Tiffany and follow @tiffanymarkman on Twitter. View my profile and articles...