

# PowerPoint That Doesn't Suck

PowerPoint is fundamentally **EVIL**. Don't let it structure your talk for you—plan on paper first. Use it for showing data, charts, photos, maps—not for spoonfeeding bites of simple text to your audience. Never read slides. Avoid bullet lists. Consider handouts with data and charts, but never just print your slides.

When making a **NEW** presentation, you can avoid the templates and create your own layouts, starting with blank slides. View > Guides to keep things aligned from one slide to the next. It's better to start with a PowerPoint template and radically simplify it, though.

When choosing **FONTS**, avoid Arial and Times (especially Times Bold). Microsoft has created several new fonts intended for screen display: Georgia, Verdana, and Trebuchet. Arial Black is also worth considering as a bold heading font. There is no absolute size rule for fonts; it depends on the size of the room, the screen, and the projector. However 30 pt is a good minimum size, and it will prevent you from putting too much text on the screen. Have someone with glasses read out your text from the back of the room!

Much folklore and hearsay surround **COLOR SCHEMES**. Reversing text (light on dark background) makes individual headings stand out but lowers readability of body text. It's OK if the room is very dark and a bright white screen might be too much, but usually dark text on a light background is better. An off-white is often more appealing; gray or oatmeal. Avoid the cliché white-on-gradient-blue. Gradients usually don't create adequate contrast everywhere. Avoid red on blue at all times (illegible to the color-blind).

View > **SLIDE MASTER** to change all the heading and bullet fonts, background colors, and other repeated elements in a presentation. You can also choose a color scheme from Format > Slide Color Scheme. Or start with a Template, then edit the slide master (like deleting superfluous cheesy graphic elements).

**INSERT SYMBOL** for accented characters, en (–) and em (—) dashes, degrees, Chi, etc. Double-check everything for typos, *especially* headings!

Clip Art is a horrible cliché. Avoid. Insert > **IMAGE** from file, using large photographs in JPEG or TIFF Format (the former makes for much smaller files), cropped and scaled. Find nice big graphics on the web using Google's Advanced Image Search features. If scanning, save as JPEG, and in Photoshop crop and resize the graphic to the size of your screen in pixels (1024 x 768 is common). Remember to drag corner handles when resizing images to avoid distorting them.

The **DRAWING TOOLS** are surprisingly powerful. The Shift key makes lines straight, ovals circular, and rectangles square. Double-click on any object to format it. Double-click on a tool to draw multiple things one after the other, and Esc to stop.

When a box or circle is selected, just typing will make text appear in it. When making a **TEXT BOX**, click to make a one-line caption, and press-and-drag to set a width and make the text wrap around. Remember to adjust the internal margins of the text box to give your type room to breathe. Text boxes, like all shapes, might need a thin line or a light fill, but not both.

To **DUPLICATE** objects (especially good with formatted text boxes) Control-drag them. Learn to set the line and fill for everything yourself (shift-click to

*Edward Tufte's polemic against PowerPoint is summarized at [www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/pptz.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/pptz.html). "PowerPoint allows speakers to pretend that they are giving a talk, and audiences to pretend they are listening."*

*Donald Norman disagrees, but still has little time for PowerPoint: [www.sociablemedia.com/articles\\_norman.htm](http://www.sociablemedia.com/articles_norman.htm). "The best talks I have ever heard had no slides at all."*

Georgia  
Verdana  
Trebuchet  
**Arial Black**

*If you don't have any images, why are you showing slides? If your talk would be boring without clip art, why are you giving it?*

*Always Insert objects into PowerPoint. Don't Copy/Paste or drag-and-drop them, especially not from a web page or spreadsheet. The latter can create a Link to the web page or file concerned, and this can make PowerPoint try to connect to the internet or open the corresponding file when you run the presentation.*

*All shortcuts are for PowerPoint 2003 for Windows; palettes may be in different places on your version or platform. Ctrl in Windows is usually the **Apple** key on a Mac, Alt the **Option** key.*

*Tip: Double-click on an object to see the very useful Format Autoshape dialog (note the Text Box tab, too). To set the default line style, line color, or fill color for all future shapes you draw, select its Default for New Objects checkbox.*

*The Draw menu contains fancy shapes, Group, and many other cool things, like buttons to help you line things up. Spend half an hour some time just trying out all the possibilities.*

*Some presenters like the successive build of bullet points because they can micromanage the audience, but this slows down the speed of information transfer enormously and makes the audience passive and sleepy. Show pictures! Go fast! Slides are free! Show lots! As Scott McCloud puts it, "it's better for the audience to be half a second behind than five minutes ahead."*

*Tip: if you have time to prepare, start the show, choose your pen color, and Black the screen. Extra tip: turn off your screensaver and energy saver before running a presentation!*

The shortlist:  
F5 start show  
Esc stop  
space next slide  
left previous slide  
b black screen  
w white screen

*For some tips, check the Powerpoint FAQs at [www.rdpslides.com/pptfaq/](http://www.rdpslides.com/pptfaq/) and [www.bitbetter.com/powerfaq.htm](http://www.bitbetter.com/powerfaq.htm)*

*More good discussions of PowerPoint at: [presentationzen.blogs.com/presentationzen/](http://presentationzen.blogs.com/presentationzen/) [www.sociablemedia.com/articles\\_mccloud.htm](http://www.sociablemedia.com/articles_mccloud.htm) [blog.guykawasaki.com/2005/12/the\\_102030\\_rule.html](http://blog.guykawasaki.com/2005/12/the_102030_rule.html)*

*Another Tufte reference: The Visual Display of Quantitative Information (Graphics Press, Cheshire, 2001—2nd ed.) Essential reading for showing data.*

*Please feel free to email me comments, suggestions, questions, and complaints.*

select multiple objects). The Tab key jumps you from object to object, and the arrow keys nudge things (Ctrl-nudge for extra precision). When assembling a complex graphic, Group the elements. You can Ungroup, edit something, Esc to unselect, and Regroup. The easiest way to control stacking order is to right-click on something and move it to the front or back.

Fix PowerPoint's lame **ARROWS** by making them thicker and less dark with big arrowheads. Connection lines join one graphic to another, allowing flow diagrams (again, fix those dreadful arrows). There are even 3D shapes possible, with control over the lighting and texture.

Explore **FILL EFFECTS**; gradients and textures are very useful, but patterns and graphic fills are not so great. Fill Color has the fill effects at the very bottom of its pop-up menu. Transparency in fills can allow nice layering. Subtle gradients spruce up boxes and backgrounds.

Transitions are basically never necessary. **ANIMATIONS** almost exclusively suck. For animations that don't suck: stick to the subtlest possible (Fade, Dissolve), don't use sound effects (!), and use them only for revealing parts of a graphic or the series in a chart (yes, you can animate charts). Tip: Wipe Left or Right applied to a line or arrow gives the illusion that it's being drawn on the screen.

**CHARTS** and **TABLES** are best created inside PowerPoint, rather than with embedded Excel files. Always Edit > Import to get data in, rather than copy and paste: the latter counterintuitively embeds the whole worksheet in your presentation, not just the chart. You can imagine the problems. Microsoft's default charts need extensive surgery before they're clear and professional.

**TO RUN A PRESENTATION** A) right-click on its file and choose Show, or B) Save As type = PowerPoint Show, and double-click that file: both avoid opening the presentation in design view. If it's already open, F5 starts the show, Shift-F5 starts it from the current slide (Control-Shift-S and Control-Shift-B respectively on a Mac), and Esc stops it. Page Down, right/down arrow, or (best) the space bar goes to the next slide; page up or left/up arrow goes back one. Home goes to the start, End to the end. Duh. Type a number and press Return to go to that slide. Learn to Hide and Show the pointer, to right-click to go to a slide by title, and (especially) to show the pen, draw, erase, and hide the pointer again. B makes the screen black, W makes it white, and the same key brings back your slide again. All these tips are available with F1 (Help) when the show is running, and right-clicking makes many of them appear in a popup menu.

Insert **MOVIE** and **SOUND** files just like graphics. The biggest problem with sound and movie files is running your presentation on another Windows machine, which will probably have different AV settings. Sound files can be WAV (best), AIFF, MOV, and much else—MP3 and MPEG will be linked, not inserted, so keep the sound with your presentation. Movies can be QuickTime, MPEG, or AVI (best), but will always be linked, not embedded. You can insert a **HYPERLINK** to a file or web page the same way, or just type a URL.

Always **TEST** your presentation in the actual room, on the actual computer, if you can. Switching between different machines usually makes graphics go AWOL, fonts substitute (especially fancy bullets), and movies crash. If you possibly can, run your PowerPoint from your own laptop (but practice connecting it to the projector so that goes seamlessly). If you can't, try out and fix every slide well ahead of time, and avoid fancy multimedia. Have fun! ¶