

Guidelines for Using PowerPoint in Your Presentations

When requiring students to complement their speech content with PowerPoint slides, it became clear that students needed some guidelines about PowerPoint presentations. As a result, I've created a set of guidelines to help you use PowerPoint effectively:

1. Set aside some time to prepare your PowerPoint slides and to look at the options available to you. You can incorporate different backgrounds, fonts, layouts, graphs, clip arts, transitions between slides, and sound effects into your PowerPoint slides. Take time to play with the options until you feel comfortable with them.
2. Get some practice setting up your PowerPoint on the classroom computer. Speak to your professor about access to the classroom for your practice session. Having a PowerPoint presentation and knowing how to use it are two different things. You need to be familiar with the system to be able to use it effectively.
3. Come a few minutes early the day of your presentation to make sure that all the equipment you need and have reserved ahead of time (cassette players, VCR players, etc.) are in good working order. Having the equipment, knowing that it works, and knowing HOW it works are three different things. You need to do all three when giving your presentation.
4. It's not a good idea to rely solely on sending your PowerPoint slides to your own e-mail address to retrieve it in the classroom; the system may be slow, or it may be down. If there is a problem, have a plan to fall back on. For instance, I often bring transparencies, as a back-up plan.
5. Do not include too many slides. Remember the rule: There must be an optimal balance between using it merely as a backdrop on the one hand, and letting the PowerPoint slides overwhelm your entire presentation on the other hand. I have seen instances where students merely use it as a backdrop, and worse yet, assume that the audience understands it merely because it is there. Refer to it when you use it, but don't read directly word for word from your overhead. Another related problem is that of using slides as a substitute for verbal transition between ideas. Just because the new slide has a title, don't just assume that reading the title constitutes a smooth transition into a new idea.
6. You also need to think of not overwhelming the audience with too many visuals, words, and sounds. Each slide should contain one main idea, with bullet points rather than full sentences on the slide. A nice transition between slides helps to increase the look of professionalism, but when it gets overdone with sounds that are irrelevant and noisy, the effect is distracting. You want the slides to enhance, rather than hinder the audience's comprehension of your main points. To achieve this goal, you may want to limit the number of slides to around five or six for a ten minute speech. Hamilton (1996) suggests this rule of thumb for the maximum number of slides: $\text{Length of speech} / 2 + 1 = \text{Maximum number}$.
7. Feel free to incorporate other forms of visual aids too. Just because PowerPoint is required for this class, it doesn't preempt you from using other visual aids, such as artifacts, or the blackboard. Research shows that in educational settings use of different forms of audio visuals enhance retention. Again, think of a balance between using only one form of visual aid and many forms. You don't want to distract, but you DO want to create visual and sensory interest.
8. In summary, play with, experiment, enjoy PowerPoint and practice giving it using different formats. Every speech is different, so what's right for one speech, speaker and audience may not be the best for another.

If you have any individual questions, please ask your instructor, or contact the Speaking Center at 654 1347.

1/24/11 Dr. Esther Yook, Speaking Center Director