

## Bulletproof Presentations: An Important Note from the AIR Best Visual Presentation Committee<sup>1</sup>

PowerPoint has become the de facto presentation tool for most of us. However, when used improperly, PowerPoint slides can actually interfere with communication, rather than promote it. The Best Visual Presentation Committee created these guidelines to help presenters identify and avoid bad PowerPoint habits, and to promote awareness of how best to use PowerPoint to create effective, meaningful presentations.

Communications researchers have identified concepts that have substantial implications for how we can create the most effective presentations:

1. *People learn better from visuals **and** narrative than from words alone. This is because the brain has separate channels for processing visual and verbal materials, resulting in a higher level of understanding. (Richard Mayer)*
2. *Communication is actually inhibited when the same words are spoken and displayed on the screen because people cannot listen and read at the same time. (Allan Paivio)*
3. *People are capable of holding only a few pieces of information in their short-term memory at a time. Our job as presenters is to make the message clear, memorable, and entertaining.*

These three concepts should inspire you, as a presenter, to abandon slide after slide of bullet points and replace them with slides that use visuals in an engaging and meaningful way. These research results should also encourage you to identify your key message and ensure that it is delivered effectively.

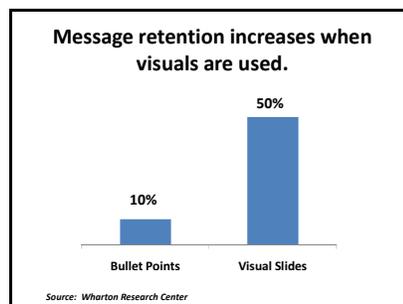
To illustrate this approach to PowerPoint, consider which of the following slides is most effective.

**Research on Message Retention**

According to research done at the Wharton Research Centre:

- Only 10% of the message is retained if the presentation contains bullet points.
- 50% of the message is retained if the presentation uses visual slides.
- That's an increase of 5 times the retention rate.

This slide is not effective visually; the audience can read the text more quickly than the speaker can discuss it, resulting in confusion and boredom.



This slide is better because it uses a visual display and the heading outlines the main message. But it lacks an emotional connection to improve message retention.



This slide is the best example because it clearly displays the message and gets the audience's attention. The accompanying handout should provide details.

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## Checklist of Good Practices in Presentations

*This checklist was prepared by the AIR Best Visual Design Committee to guide you as you prepare your presentation for the AIR Forum. These practices will help you optimize communication with your audience and maximize the impact of your message. You may even be eligible for AIR's Best Visual Presentation Award.*

### Organizing the Presentation

- Ask yourself two questions before creating your presentation: 1) **What is my point** and 2) **Why does it matter?** By identifying the one thing you want the audience to remember and framing it in a way that connects with them, you can focus your presentation and deliver a clear and memorable message.*
- Sketch out your entire presentation (on paper, a whiteboard, or sticky notes) prior to putting it into PowerPoint. This approach enables you to concentrate on the content and flow rather than on technology.*
- Tell a story rather than giving a lecture. Audience members want to engage both sides of their brain during a presentation; they want to learn and be engaged - or even entertained - at the same time. Carefully plan an introduction that grabs the audience's attention and introduces your topic.*
- Build in mental breaks for the audience at least every 15-20 minutes to maximize the effectiveness of your presentation. These can be group exercises, questions and answers, sharing with other audience members, or other activities that involve the audience. Mental breaks allow the audience to return to your presentation refreshed and ready to refocus.*
- Design a closing that leaves the audience with a clear message you want them to remember.*
- Rehearse your presentation with a projector and in front of an audience until you are comfortable delivering it without relying on notes. If you are nervous or tentative with your delivery, the audience will immediately notice and your message will be compromised.*
- Time your presentation, allowing adequate time for questions at the end. Presentations that are either too short or too long will disappoint or annoy your audience.*

### Designing the Presentation

- Design a template that promotes readability by using a dark font on a light background or vice versa.*
- Ensure your template is free from distracting items, such as logos or other footers.*
- Select a sans serif font such as Calibri, Arial, or Trebuchet. Limit your fonts to three, at most. (Serif fonts, such as Times New Roman or Century Schoolbook, are better for blocks of text on printed documents.)*
- Always use fonts that are 24 point or larger. If you have a large amount of detailed information to present, include it in your handout, and display only the highlights in your presentation.*
- Use phrases rather than full sentences, with the possible exception of short direct quotes.*
- Use bullet points sparingly. If using bullet points, be sure they are less than six words long.*
- Eliminate the use of headings or titles unless they communicate the main message. Headings should not be used to identify the topic of the slide.*
- Incorporate high-quality photos, images, or diagrams that reinforce your verbal message; avoid the use of clipart.*
- Use animation, slide transitions, audio, and video sparingly and then only to reinforce a key concept.*
- Follow good design principles in creating tables and graphs. Eliminate "chart junk", ensure the most appropriate type of graph was chosen, and highlight the most important element so the audience easily can determine the message. Do not use three-dimensional graphics to depict two-dimensional data.*

- Create a handout to accompany your presentation, which should not be a copy of your PowerPoint slides. Write it in report format with detailed information and references to which the audience can refer later.*

## Recommended Reading

Atkinson, C. (2008). *Beyond Bullet Points*. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Press.

Few, S. (2004). *Show Me the Numbers: Designing Tables and Graphs to Enlighten*. Oakland, CA: Analytics Press.

Paradi, D. (n.d.). Think Outside the Slide. Retrieved from <http://www.thinkoutsidetheslide.com>.

Reynolds, G. (2008). *Presentation Zen: Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery*. Berkeley, CA: New Riders.