PowerPoint Can Be So Much Better

30 million PowerPoint presentations are delivered every single day and sadly 99.9% of them are painfully boring and woefully ineffective. Yet, it doesn’t have to be this way. By following the principles in this report, you can easily put yourself in the top 0.01%. Let’s do it!

1. You Are The Presentation.
PowerPoint is designed to enhance you, not replace you. The audience came to see and hear you present information, inspire action and/or change minds. Not read the text of your speech from a PowerPoint slide. At every step of the speech crafting process ask yourself, “What is the best way to convey this information to the audience?” PowerPoint slide? Flip chart? Demonstration? Example? Story? Mini-Q&A? These tactics are designed to invigorate your material and improve retention. Keep in mind, the focus of any great presentation has been and will always be the speaker.

2. Be A Chef.
When it comes to PowerPoint, think of yourself as a chef and the things you project on the screen are your ingredients. The ingredients need the chef in order to be of any true value to the audience. If you give them a fully-cooked meal, then you’ve made yourself obsolete. The best PowerPoint presenters flash just enough content on the screen to remind the speaker what to say and to reinforce the material through visual cues. Speakers who put the verbatim text of their speech on their PowerPoint run the risk of being pelted in the head with rocks and garbage from the audience.

3. Think Visually.
In general people think in terms of images not words. If I were to say the word “giraffe” to you, you would picture a nice yellow, long-necked, giraffe probably snacking on some leaves on an African plain. Mentally you would not conjure a series of bullet points and words that describe a giraffe. Now, when it comes to designing a PowerPoint presentation, keep in mind that we live in a media-saturated culture and we’re accustomed to a steady stream of visual eye-candy from Hollywood and Madison Avenue. If that’s the world we live in, why not embrace it and give the people what they want in your PowerPoint?
4. Practice Slide Variety.
Among the three main types of slides: bullets/text, charts/graphs and pictures/images, 98.43% of all slides are bullets/text. Yet when given a choice, audiences strongly prefer to see pictures/images. While you may not be able to turn all of your high-content slides into “happy picture fun time,” you can identify text slides that can be presented graphically. To gauge how much variety you have, put your presentation in “Slide Sorter View” and look at how many of your slides are text vs. graphs vs. pictures. There are a host of pre-made graphical slides from bull’s-eyes to flowcharts to circle graphs. Not to mention there are numerous free image and low-cost, royalty free sites on the Internet.

5. Honor The 4x4 Principle.
Humans are unabashedly curious. That’s a good thing. However, when speakers flash a lot of text on a PowerPoint slide, curious audience members cannot help but read the material. When they’re reading, they’re not listening to you, the speaker. So, the best way to display key information in your PowerPoint slides and stay connected with your audience is by practicing the 4x4 rule. The 4x4 rule states that each slide should have no more than four bullets and each bullet should have no more than four words. Try it. You’d be amazed how much more people pay attention to you and lock in on the key points you’re making.

6. Talk to People, Not Screens
The best presenters on the planet know that they’re in the business of connecting with audiences and changing minds. You can’t do either if you’re facing the screen and reading your slides word-for-word. Feel free to glance at the screen to get an idea of what you’d like to say, but be sure to turn back to the audience and deliver your thoughts directly to them.

In addition to the fact that it just looks bad, when you talk to the screen your volume will be cut in half. Build trust, reinforce your credibility, look confident—talk to your audience members by looking them in the eye.

7. Avoid Extraneous Animation.
PowerPoint offers a world of animation schemes and transition sounds like the typewriter, screeching tires, and the “boing” sound. Resist the temptation to use these gimmicks. They will only distract your listeners from the ideas you’re trying to convey. If you think your content needs a little excitement, find an insightful or humorous quote, a poignant New Yorker comic, or an arresting image. The key to adding this to your presentation is to make sure it is relevant to your subject matter.

8. Keep Point Size 24 Or Larger.
Most audience members cannot read type that is smaller than 24pt. PowerPoint is self-correcting in this area because as you add bullets and text, the program will automatically shrink the text to fit the screen. When your text gets smaller than 24pt., it’s time to create another slide. And slides are free; make as many as you need. (If you follow the 4x4 rule in #5 above, your type size should never get any smaller than 32pt.)

9. Make Your Titles Headlines.
The real estate on your slides is at a premium, especially when you have a lot of complicated information to communicate. Take advantage of your limited space by creating your slide titles to read more like headlines instead of headings. For example, if your slide title is “4th Quarter Results”, you’ll have to spend additional space on the slide to explain exactly what the 4th quarter results were. However, if your title reads “4th Quarter Results Lower Than Expected”, you are freed up to
devote valuable space below to other information. Headlines also make your slides easier to understand for your audience.

10. Highlight What’s Important.
From time to time you may have to deliver text slides that cannot be reduced to 4x4 (see #5 above), when this happens be sure to highlight the most important words on the slide. This provides your audience an opportunity to quickly process the key points you’re trying to convey without having to sift through everything on the slide. Some good ways to do this are through **bold**, *color*, *italicize*, and even by playing with the *point size*.

Extra Thought (Because I Like To Give): Never End A Presentation With Q&A.
Don’t conclude an otherwise great presentation with a flat, boring, perhaps contentious Q&A session. Stick the landing. Psychologists tell us that people tend to remember the last thing they hear, so let it be your key take-home message. What’s that one thought, idea, attitude or action you want them to leave with? Q&A can fit nicely into any presentation as the second-to-last thing you do. Open the floor for questions by saying, “Before I make my final point, what questions do you have about my presentation?” After the questions, finish strong with your concise take-home message.

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Steve Hughes
Steve Hughes is the President of Hit Your Stride, LLC, a communications consultancy that helps people look and sound smart when they talk. His seminars have been featured on NPR, BBC Radio, and CBS television, and he is also the creator of “National Face Your Fears Day” (observed annually on the 2nd Tuesday in October). Prior to speaking full time, Steve spent 12 years in advertising and public relations—most recently he was a managing partner at an award winning 40-person ad agency in St. Louis. Steve holds a BA in French Literature and European History from the University of Kansas and an MBA in Marketing from Washington University, where he won the prestigious Olin Cup. Today, he lives of St. Louis with his wife and their two well-behaved daughters.

Clients
Corporate: MetLife, Nestle Purina, Boeing, Deloitte, MasterCard, Microsoft
Law Firms: Latham & Watkins, Kirkland & Ellis, Bryan Cave, Crowell & Moring, Husch Blackwell
Education: Washington University, U. of Minnesota, U. of Missouri, MICDS, Kirk Day School
Associations: ASTD, American Marketing Assoc., NALP, Legal Marketing Assoc., SHRM

Steve’s Keynote Programs
• “Rich Beyond Measure: The Surprising Personal & Professional Benefits of Giving without Keeping Score”
• “Hit Your Stride: Winning the Race in Business and in Life”
• “Moveable Mountains: Telling Stories to Engage & Inspire”

Steve’s Popular Training Programs
• “Presenting with Excellence”
• “Says Who? The Art & Science of Changing Minds”
• “Tell Me More: Profiting from the Most Important Question in Business”
• “Put the Power Back in PowerPoint”
• “Leave ‘em Laughing: Using Humor for Serious Impact”
• “Rainmaking 1-2-3: Making Business Development a Natural Part of Your Everyday Life”