

"My Favorite PowerPoint!!!"  
Strengthening Oral Presentation Skills through Awful PowerPoint Presentations  
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In high school, I regularly participated in public speaking events that helped me become comfortable with presenting in front of groups, thinking on my feet, and supporting my arguments with rhetorical appeals. Now, as a faculty member, I regularly teach composition courses—particularly business and technical communication—and draw heavily on my experiences with public speaking and debate in order to teach them. Several major assignments in my classes involve oral presentations in front of peers. For many students, orally presenting their work to classmates is far more daunting than the composition of that work; the majority of my students describe the oral presentation component as the most worrisome aspect of the semester. However, these same students recognize the importance of oral communication and eagerly embrace advice on how to become polished public speakers. In addition, these students are often well aware of the consequences of poor oral presentation skills on the part of their instructors: some sleep through lectures that fail to engage them or critique instructors who simply read verbatim from PowerPoint presentations.

Poor PowerPoint presentations provide an excellent starting point from which to engage students in an active-learning activity, one which helps them to strengthen their public speaking skills in a low-stakes environment. Setting aside one or two class periods for an "Awful PowerPoint Contest" encourages students to draw on their previous experiences with poor oral presentations and apply this knowledge to their own classroom presentations. This assignment also helps students see the importance of good document design to composition. Finally, students enjoy assembling deliberately awful PowerPoint presentations, and the class discussions afterward are lively and insightful.

Getting the class started is simple since the majority of students are already familiar with PowerPoint—the software has an easy-to-use wizard that will walk students through the process if they are unfamiliar with the program. Before we begin, I ask students to complete two readings regarding the ubiquity of PowerPoint in our culture: "Absolute PowerPoint: Can a Software Package Edit Our Thoughts?" by Ian Parker and "Really Bad PowerPoint (and How to Avoid it)" by Seth Godin. Parker's piece traces the origins of Microsoft PowerPoint, outlining its gradual ascent in popularity to become the most pervasive presentation software; he estimates that thirty million PowerPoint presentations are made each day (4). Parker also notes that the program is highly restrictive rhetorically: "It helps you to make a case, but it also makes its own case: about how to organize information, how much information to organize, how to look at the world" (1). Godin is even more direct: "PowerPoint could be the most important tool on your computer. *But it's not.* It's actually a dismal failure" (3, emphasis in original). These readings offer students a standpoint from which to argue about the impact of the software on our communication practices.

When the students are ready to begin fashioning their PowerPoint presentations, divide the class into small groups and instruct them to make the worst PowerPoint presentation possible. If the course has already covered visual design principles in composition, then students can be asked to draw on that knowledge in order to intentionally violate rules of good design. Students may also make their presentations unclear, disorganized, and weak in content, or include auditory elements for added effect. The instructor may want to limit the number of slides, or require a topic related to the course. However, I have found students enjoy creating presentations on topics they choose themselves (which have ranged from cheese-making, to plagiarizing, to "how to fail this class"). Student groups generally need anywhere from fifteen minutes to half an hour to create their presentations—less if they are only creating the PowerPoint presentation, more if they are asked to deliver a short oral presentation to accompany it. Groups then present their PowerPoint to the class, while each student takes notes on the design principles violated. After all of the presentations have been shown, the class can list the design principles and presentation guidelines that were ignored. If instructors desire, students can vote on the worst presentation, and a small reward can be offered to the winner.

As students create their awful PowerPoint presentations, they should analyze the process on several levels. The simplest level is that of the document's design and the interplay between design and the speaker's ability to communicate. Students should notice the features Microsoft offers for personalizing presentations: audio clips, slide transitions, bullets, animated images, clip art, and colourful fonts. The instructor can encourage students to connect the overuse of such features to the ability of the audience to digest the information presented, and show how communication is hampered by an abundance of distractions. In this exercise, students often purposely write obtusely or with poor grammar, such as one

student group that titled their presentation "My Favorite PowerPoint!!!" While considering the important interplay of form and function, students can be also encouraged to think about the impact of PowerPoint on communication within cultures. Asking students to consider the arguments Parker and Godin make in their respective texts can help students to formulate their own opinions.

The presentations created by student groups truly ran the gamut as far as poor design choices; however, there are some aspects of PowerPoint that students repeatedly exploited in their quest for awful presentations. These aspects included sub-optimal contrast, abundant (and often poorly formatted or proofread) text, and unclear or unnecessary images. In design, optimal contrast aims for a stark, yet visually appealing differentiation between two or more colours. The most common example of optimal contrast is the traditional black text on a white page, which is easy to read because it does not cause the vision to vibrate or oscillate as a result of clashing colours. Student groups often strove for sub-optimal contrast, and deliberately attempted to find clashing, visually painful colour combinations: fuchsia checks against a purple background with bright yellow text, neon green over black vertical stripes, or bright red words against a shockingly brilliant turquoise background.

Student groups also tried to cram as much text onto a single slide as possible, generally ending up with a solid wall of text in a tiny and unreadable font such as five-point "Lucida Handwriting." Large blocks of text like these violate the fundamental principle of a good PowerPoint presentation—that is, the presentation should support, not supplant, the speaker:

[T]ext processing is in essence sequential, and the human brain cannot, in first approximation, process two sequential entries at the same time. When presented with a slide full of text, we are faced with a dilemma: either read the text or listen to the speaker. We cannot do both, unless the speaker reads the text with us, in which case we might question the added value of either speaker or slide. (Dumont 65)

Overwhelming walls of text are not only visually unappealing but also distracting; they cause the audience to focus on the words featured on the slides rather than the speaker's message. Several student groups also mocked poor PowerPoint presentations by deliberately including a blank slide in the middle of their presentation, or leaving the header of at least one slide blank. Unfortunately, the line "click here to add text" in real PowerPoint presentations is all too common, as the students cheekily implied.

Finally, students had a great deal of fun filling their slides with as many pointless and unclear images as possible. From unlabeled graphs, to randomly chosen Microsoft Office clip art, to animated GIFs culled from the internet, the awful PowerPoint presentations were visual smorgasbords of inappropriate images. In fact, students frequently aimed to violate ethical guidelines discussed in class: they used images emblazoned with "Do Not Copy"; chose Facebook photos featuring underage drinking; or included slides with entire blocks of text lifted from Wikipedia without attribution. One group even embedded a YouTube video from the television show *Family Guy*, which featured a cartoon character with a long beard and a turban discussing "death to Americans" and suicide-bombing missions. The clip was not only in violation of copyright laws, but also potentially offensive to many different audience members. Though other groups' use of images did not cross legal, ethical, or moral boundaries, their images were chosen simply because they added nothing to the message they wished to convey. Thus, on a variety of levels—aural, visual, and textual—students were able to demonstrate their awareness of good design principles by blatantly violating them. Not only were their results often humorous—the blank black and white "click here to add text" slides reminded me of some unfortunate presentations I have sat through—but also provoked discussions on a range of legal, ethical, and moral topics.

I have talked at length about aspects of poor design to avoid when composing slides in PowerPoint. But what, then, should a good PowerPoint presentation look like or include? Ideally, these presentations should conform to certain design ideals in order to be most effective in helping students retain material. Indeed, one of the key elements of design is consistency—without consistency many presentations end up as awkward mixtures of form and content, and lack a coherent message as a result. Since consistency in PowerPoint design helps to clarify an author's message, it can actually aid in learning and memory retention. For example, when consistent typographical elements are used to emphasize key learning points, students demonstrate significantly higher learning recall as compared to students who view PowerPoint presentations that feature unclear font styles and sizes (James, Burke, and Hutchins 390). Therefore, design consistency at the textual level necessitates a uniform style guide template for choosing font faces and sizes, the use of serif or sans-serif type, and layout choices such as the placement and length of headers and sub-headers. Above all, authors of PowerPoint presentations should determine a suitable style that demonstrates rhetorical awareness of purpose and audience.

While consistency in textual elements is key to creating good PowerPoint presentations, appropriate selection of multimedia elements is also important. Because PowerPoint allows for the communication of

textual material through visual and auditory channels, authors should select videos, music, and images that relate to the material being presented and that show attention to cogent design. Multimodal elements should, like the text, support the presenter rather than replace him or her. Thus, to avoid competing with the oral presentation for the audience's attention, there should be as little text as possible on each slide—effective slides are primarily visual (Doumont 68). Finally, multimodal elements should be selected with care, and with the knowledge that they too will affect the speaker's ethos or credibility. Low-quality, tinny music; prefabricated clip art; and highly pixelated, amateur YouTube videos can all reflect poorly on the speaker. Authors should take care to either avoid materials that are flawed (such as washed-out images, grainy videos, or inaudible music) or create their own material using quality digital cameras, video recorders, audio software, and so on. Overall, since a PowerPoint presentation is a vehicle for conveying messages through a variety of modes—aural, visual, and textual—authors should be careful to consider the rhetorical impact of their design choices and strive above all for consistency.

Before I began to incorporate the "Awful PowerPoint Contest" into my courses, I was concerned that students did not apply what they had learned about composing written work to their oral presentations. Their slideshows relied on distracting images, clashing colours, dozens of different slide transitions, and ill-suited audio clips. After students had the opportunity to intentionally "fail" an assignment, I saw more effective presentations. Deliberately creating a presentation that violates design rules and hampers communication helps students to then do exactly the opposite; they learn to fashion presentations that use the software to enhance, not detract, from the speaker and the presentation of information. Overall, students embrace the opportunity to deliberately perform poorly on an assignment. The awful PowerPoint exercise promotes active engagement with the subject matter, and makes use of thoughtful design and clearly articulated content: two important principles of written and oral communication.

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#### Works Cited

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