

Preparing Effective PowerPoint Presentations

Are you tired of sitting through terrible PowerPoint presentations? Do you feel that you were never properly trained on how to prepare and deliver effective presentations? Well, you are not alone! At some point or another, you will be required to make a presentation involving visual aids such as Microsoft PowerPoint slides. Undoubtedly, being able to prepare effective presentations represents a core skill that students need to master during their academic journey. By definition, an effective presentation meets its objectives. Effective presentations are also marked by high-quality visuals and by smooth, practiced delivery. Importantly, the content of the presentation and any supporting visuals or handouts should be relevant to the audience members and useful considering their needs and requirements. This guide should help you with the stepwise process by which an effective presentation is made to happen.

1. Planning your presentation

When planning your presentation, you want to consider two main aspects:

- **Purpose/objective** – *Why and what?*

Here, you need to be mindful of what you are trying to achieve. What is the purpose of the presentation? To educate and inform? To inspire, interest and persuade?

Additionally, you need to consider the relevance and usefulness of the content to your audience and your objectives. Know your subject and develop a theme. List the key concepts and points to convey and begin to think about ways of illustrating these key points.

- **Audience** – *Who and where?*

Aside from knowing your subject matter, nothing is more important than knowing your target audience. Who are they? What are their interests, needs and requirements? What “language” do they speak (humanities, science, marketing and finance, etc)? What do they value and what is their role (doctor, professor, lecturer, student)?

2. Structure of the presentation

In general, your presentation will consist of an opening, a main body and a closing.

- **Opening** – *Your opening must be bold and catchy. Tell them what you are going to talk about. You need a strong beginning (only have a few seconds to convince your audience); can include an element of surprise, such as an image or anecdote to start with. Introduce the problem to be addressed and the context. State the purpose, scope and main message. Can also include a brief outline (1 slide) of the presentation.*
- **Main body** – *The main body of your presentation will have as many slides as necessary to make and support the points you are trying to convey. The organization of the main body should be chronological, concise, logical and cohesive. Illustrate with clear examples and visual aids.*
- **Closing** – *Your presentation must have a clear end and must answer the question “so what?” Essentially, your closing should: (1) provide a brief and simple summary/recap of the main points, (2) reinforce the main message of the presentation and (3) put the presentation in context of the big picture.*

3. Slides and visual aids

Below are some important points to consider when preparing your slides and selecting the appropriate visual aids for your presentation:

- **Slides**
 - (i) Use a consistent and simple design template (uniform font, colour and background).
 - (ii) Each slide should have an appropriate headline for the main point (1 slide = 1 main point).
 - (iii) Limit the amount of text on each slide (remember that the audience cannot read and listen to you at the same time, so too much text is distracting). Use the 6 X 6 rule – no more than six bullet points per slide and no more than six words per bullet point. Remember to check the spelling and grammar!
 - (iv) It is often more effective to have bullet points appear one at a time so that the audience listens to the presenter rather than reading the screen.
 - (v) Use contrasting colours for text and background. Dark text on a light background is best. Patterned backgrounds can reduce readability of text.
 - (vi) Limit punctuation and avoid putting words in all capital letters. Empty spaces on the slide will enhance readability.
 - (vii) Avoid the use of flashy transitions such as text fly-ins. These features may seem impressive at first but are distracting and get old quickly.
 - (viii) Choose legible type and size of fonts (for titles 30-45 and for the body not less than 20). Avoid italicized fonts as they are difficult to read quickly.

- **Visual aids**

- (i) Illustrate slides with relevant images to explain difficult points and generate interest. However, limit images to one or two per slide, so as not to distract your audience (too many images will make your presentation slow to load, so use images wisely).
- (ii) Use good quality images that reinforce and complement your message. Ensure that your images maintain their impact and resolution when projected on a larger screen.
- (iii) Avoid the overuse of special effects such as animations and sounds as they could negatively impact your credibility.
- (iv) Remember to label the graphic; use only enough text when using charts or graphs to explain the concept. Keep the design clean and uncluttered. Leave empty space around the text and graphics.

4. Practice and delivery

“Practice makes perfect” or so the saying goes. There are many good reasons to practice your presentation:

- To familiarise yourself with the content and the visuals.
- To ensure smooth handoffs if the presentation involves more than one presenter.
- To identify the kinds of questions and issues that might surface during the actual presentation.

Here are some final tips:

- (i) Do not read the presentation. Practice the presentation so you can speak from bullet points. The text should be a cue for the presenter rather than a message for the viewer.
- (ii) Practice with someone who has never seen your presentation. Ask them for honest feedback about colours, content, and any effects or graphics you have included.
- (iii) Do not speak to your slides. Many presenters face the direction of their presentation rather than their audience.
- (iv) Do not apologize for anything in your presentation. If you believe something will be hard to read or understand, do not use it.

Adapted from:

Fred Nickols, United States. Effective presentations. Available at: <https://www.nickols.us> (accessed: 13th July 2021).

University of Cambridge, United Kingdom. How to prepare and deliver a presentation. Available at: <https://mi.eng.cam.ac.uk> (accessed: 13th July 2021).

University of Washington, United States. Tips for effective PowerPoint presentations. Available at: <https://hr.uw.edu> (accessed: 15th June 2021).

Montana State University, United States. Making an effective PowerPoint presentation. Available at: <http://www.montana.edu> (accessed: 13th July 2021).

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