

HOW TO ENVISION, DESIGN, AND DELIVER ENGAGING RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

“The One Skill [that Billionaire] Warren Buffett Says Will Raise Your Value by 50 Percent” is the topic of this chapter (Gallo, 2017). It is a skill that is essential throughout academia, at all ages and stages. It is a skill that is required at scientific conferences, job interviews, brown-bags, and colloquia. It is a staple of academic life, and it is the ability to envision, design, and deliver engaging research presentations.

The public might refer to this skill as “public speaking,” some conferences refer to it as delivering “oral presentations” or “spoken presentations,” and many departments refer to presentations at interviews as “job talks.” In this chapter, I will use more inclusive terminology. Although a research presentation can be delivered in spoken or oral language, it can also be delivered in signed language, for example, American Sign Language, which is a visual, not a spoken or oral language. Similarly, a research presentation can be delivered using text-to-speech (e.g., the computer-generated speech used by the late physicist Stephen Hawking). Because research presentations need not be only “spoken presentations” or “oral presentations,” I will refer to research presentations as “presentations.”

In this chapter, I will synthesize advice for how to envision, design, and deliver engaging research presentations. The advice comes from a different type of mentor. Some of the advice comes from psychologists, but a lot of the advice comes from graphic designers and science communicators. I will begin by reviewing the history of research presentations (and the visual aids used historically). I will continue by analyzing more versus less successful presentations. I will then provide step-by-step instructions for how to envision and design research presentations and their visual aids, including distinguishing between designing slides for handouts versus in-person presentations. Lastly, I will proffer tips for ensuring a smooth delivery and answering questions, both during and at the end of a presentation. A fuller description of these tips and strategies is available in Gernsbacher (2013).

KNOW THE HISTORY OF RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS

We might think the primary feature of research presentations is that they have accompanying visuals. However, accompanying visuals were not historically a feature of presentations; the use of accompanying visuals dates back fewer than 50 years. Many illustrious academics – William James, Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, Rachel Carson – gave all of their presentations without any slides, graphics, and definitely without PowerPoint, although an occasional chalk board might have been brought in.

The decade or so before I went to graduate school began the first widespread use of accompanying visuals. The visuals were 2x2 photographic slides – meaning, the slides were literal photographs. To prepare these slides, researchers took the materials they wanted photographed to a photographer, which cost money; therefore, researchers were picky about what they put on a slide, which was a good thing. Researchers also tended to walk around conferences carrying slide carousels, which probably was not a good thing.

Shortly after I left graduate school, overhead transparencies became the preferred form of accompanying visuals for research presentations. These overhead transparencies were initially hand drawn and hand written (considered tacky, but quick); then, the technology to photocopy onto overhead transparencies became available.

PowerPoint, the popular accompanying visual of current day presentations, came into vogue in the mid-1990s. Its advent is recent enough that less than a decade ago when one of my doctoral students asked one of our psychology department faculty members to observe her teaching a statistics course, the faculty member was concerned that the doctoral student was using PowerPoint to teach statistics (rather than writing on overhead transparencies or – gasp – writing on the chalkboard).

My point in taking this walk down memory lane is to highlight the fact that for centuries researchers gave inspiring, insightful, and easily comprehended presentations without any visual aids. For a couple of decades, before, during, and after I was in graduate school, researchers gave inspiring, insightful, and easily comprehended presentations with only photographs. It was only when overhead transparencies became the norm that a plethora of text began appearing on accompanying visuals. Then, PowerPoint arrived on the scene and catapulted heavily text-based visuals to the extreme, which in turn spawned books, websites, blogs, cartoons, and even t-shirts titled, “Death by PowerPoint.”

AVOID DEATH BY POWERPOINT (FOREGO THE BULLETS)

Cartoons across the Internet decry PowerPoint. In one, the cartoon character Dilbert is seated in the audience while a presenter announces, “I could’ve e-mailed you my PowerPoint deck, and you could have read it in five minutes. But I prefer making you sit here for an hour while I read each bullet point in slow motion” (Adams, 2010). In another, a presenter gestures to the screen while warning his audience, “Here’s a remarkable idea, rendered lifeless in 127 ... slides that I’ll read word by word for the next 90 minutes” (Fishburne, 2009).

Presentation designer Desjardins (2010a, b) interrogates these cartoons, and the all-too-frequent real-world behavior that inspires them, in the following way: “When someone puts all their text in their presentation I say to myself: ‘Dude?! What’s the point of being here?! Just email me your slides and I’ll read it on my own time without you’” because “If you’re going to put word for word what you’re are going to say, hand over the slides and sit down, buddy.”

How can you avoid such dilemmas? As Desjardins (2010b) explains, “It’s not PowerPoint that sucks. It’s the speaker (you) who is responsible for using it effectively.” Or, put another way, it is not PowerPoint that causes death, it is the bullets. Think about it: What do textual bullets signify? They signify lists. What are bulleted lists good for? They are good for outlines. What are outlines good for? They are good for organizing your thoughts and planning your project, including your presentation. But outlines are not good as visual accouterments for your presentation.

Recall that decades before PowerPoint and overhead transparencies, researchers gave powerful, engaging presentations with only photographs. Showing photographs is an effective way to use PowerPoint. But showing your audience slide after slide of outlines is not an effective way to use PowerPoint. There needs to be value added; otherwise, you might as well simply email the slides to your audience.

Below, I provide more advice for how to create engaging slides. But, first, to answer a common question, I will turn to presentation guru, Garr Reynolds, who has authored several books on improving presentations (2006, emphasis added):

Many people often say something like this: “Sorry I missed your presentation. I hear it was great. Can you just send me your PowerPoint slides?” **But if they are good slides, they will be of little use without you.** Instead of a copy of your PowerPoint slides, it is far better to prepare a written document that highlights your content from the presentation and expands on that content. **Audiences are much better served receiving a detailed, written handout as a takeaway from the presentation, rather than a mere copy of your PowerPoint slides.** If you have a detailed handout or publication for the audience to be passed out after your talk, you need not feel compelled to fill your PowerPoint slides with a great deal of text.

LEARN THROUGH EXAMPLES

One of the best ways to learn is through examples, in particular, contrasting examples. And one of the best ways to learn how to ditch the bullet-laden PowerPoint slides and embrace engaging visual aids is through contrasting examples. In the presentation

world, the classic contrast is between Steve Jobs' masterful 2005 keynote and Bill Gates' less-masterful 2005 keynote. Links to video excerpts of these two keynotes are provided in this chapter's Reference section. Take a few minutes to watch those videos. Observe the difference between Steve Jobs' and Bill Gates' presentation style and note particularly their visual accompaniments. Although I am a hard-core Apple aficionado, this contrast goes beyond Mac versus PC. Reynolds (2006) describes the contrast in following way (emphasis added):

Both Steve and Bill use slides to complement their talks. Steve's visuals are a big part of his talk. **The visuals are necessary not decorative.** The visuals do not overpower him, but they are an important component of the talk, not just icing on the cake. Steve uses the slides to help him tell a story, and he interacts with them in a natural way, rarely turning his back on the audience.

Steve uses the huge backlit screen behind him in the same spirit that George Lucas uses his screen: to help tell a story. Lucas uses actors, visuals, and effects to convey his message, Steve uses visuals and his own words and natural presence to tell his story. In Bill's case the slides are not only of low aesthetic quality ... they simply do not really help Bill's narrative very much.

But the biggest difference is not only the fact that Steve's slides are simpler with fewer elements and fewer bullet points, the biggest difference is in the way they are used. ... Steve's slides flow smoothly with his talk. Bill's slides aren't really necessary; they are more of an ornament or a decoration off to the side.

However, as Reynolds notes, even Bill Gates has learned the principles of good presentations, and Gates' more recent presentations illustrate those improvements. I am sure you can, too.

PLAN YOUR PRESENTATION

Before you ever open up your PowerPoint app, plan your presentation. That is, plan your presentation outside the PowerPoint app. Indeed, several experts recommend using low-tech media first, for instance, paper and pencil or electronic notes, but not opening PowerPoint until you have charted out what you want your presentation to be and to do (Grant, 2010; Wienot Films, 2011). That way you will not be tempted to succumb to a PowerPoint template that forces you to enter a set of bullet points on each slide.

Most importantly, plan your presentation's beginning, middle, and end (Kapterev, 2007; Wienot Films, 2011). If you are having trouble identifying your presentation's beginning, middle, and end, watch some engaging presentations and practice identifying their beginning, middle, and end. Here are five good examples of engaging research presentations; for each, identify its beginning, middle, and end.

1. Kate Yoshida's (2017) "[Why It Sucks to Be a Male Hyena](#)" (which presents Yoshida's PhD research)
2. MinuteEarth's (2015) "[Do We Have to Get Old and Die?](#)" (which illustrates that even complex genetic information can be presented engagingly without boring bullet points)
3. MinuteEarth's (2016) "[The Mystery of Asparagus Pee](#)"
4. MinuteEarth's (2016) "[How Different Are Different Types of Dogs?](#)"
5. MinuteEarth's (2013) "[Do Fetuses Poop?](#)"

For your beginning, my heartiest advice is to start with a hook, which is how you will reel in your audience. All good presentations (and articles, for that matter) begin with a hook (Gernsbacher, 2018). Do not begin by saying, "My study is about ..." and then

proceed to read your title. That is not a hook; that is an invitation to snooze. Google the term “hook writing” if you are unsure what a hook is, but always, always begin with a hook.

Krobman (2006) shares other pearls of wisdom including the fact that “Simplicity is a virtue. Avoid using jargon or acronyms. Aim for simplicity in every aspect of your talk, not just language. Can you organize your data more clearly? Can you make simpler graphs? Can you remove unnecessary nuance from your literature review?” Krobman (2006) also recommends the following:

Know your audience and drop down the sophistication one step. For example, when presenting to developmental psychology professors and graduate students, speak for professors and graduate students in any area of psychology. Why drop down a step? Your most sophisticated audience is listening to your talk as a scientific argument for your hypothesis. They would like you to take them through your argument step by step, and ideally (from your perspective) they should nod at each premise and step you take. Just because people know something does not mean it is at the front of their mind when it is relevant to you.

DESIGN YOUR VISUAL ACCOUTERMENTS (AKA: SLIDES)

Only after planning your presentation’s beginning, middle, and end, are you ready to begin design your visual accompaniments. Remember you want your slides to support your presentation, not be an outline of your presentation (think Steve Jobs not Bill Gates). Here are two websites to consult for inspiration and guidance: Reynolds’ (2006) “10 Slide Design Tips for Producing Powerful and Effective Presentations” and Hite’s (2010) “Designing your Slides.”

For example, Reynolds’ (2006) recommends using “a consistent visual theme throughout your presentation” but avoiding the standard PowerPoint templates. I too recommend resisting the temptation to place a “Title” (i.e., the thing PowerPoint prompts you for when it says, “Click to Add Title”) at the top of your slides. Remember: In an interesting and engaging talk, your slides are visual aids; they are not written outlines. Unfortunately, the standard PowerPoint (and even Keynote) templates solicit speakers to type in a title and follow that title with bullets, making their slides look like written outlines. Resist this temptation. Indeed, Hite (2010) recommends using only blank slides.

Hite (2010) also provides excellent examples of using photographs to fill the entire slide; when text is needed, working to simplify the text; and ensuring that text is in large font. Hite (2010) also recommends abiding by the “Rule of Thirds,” which is a principle in photography. Google to learn more about the Rule of Thirds, because it works great in slide design. And it is the opposite of what most people do when designing slides, which is they place the focal object in the center (see Dlugan, 2009).

I also recommend designing your slides for rooms that are narrow and deep. If you find yourself telling your audience, “You probably can’t see the ___” (e.g., box on the far left, figure at the very bottom, yellow circles around interesting data points), you probably should have not designed your slide that way. Similarly, if you find yourself telling your audience, “That’s probably too small for you to see,” then you probably should not have put it on the slide. I recommend never using a font that is smaller than 48 point on any portion of any slide.

As a short person who has craned her neck in far too many presentations, I recommend not putting anything of interest or importance in the bottom third of your slide. Why not? Most of the rooms in which you present will not have graduated seats (in contrast to what is found in movie theater, for which seats farther from the front are higher in the vertical plane). Therefore, in a typical seminar room and in most hotel conference venues, the short people sitting in the back are unlikely to see the bottom third of your slides.

Most important: Ensure that your slides accompany your presentation, not outline it.

PRACTICE YOUR PRESENTATION

Perhaps one of the attractions of bullet-point laden PowerPoint slides is that presenters do not feel the need to practice. They simply read off their slides! But presentations for which slides are the accompaniment rather than the outline require practice. My rule of thumb is that for every presentation, be it 15 minutes or an hour, I rehearse the entire presentation at least three times without stopping.

Nancy Duarte, author of *slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations* (2008) recommends first practicing with the clock counting up so that if you exceed your allotted time, you will know how much needs to be cut. Then, Duarte recommends repeated practicing with the clock counting down. That way, you will become familiar with where you should be at different time posts (e.g., five-minute warning). Duarte also recommends having two natural ending points, just in case you run over.

DELIVER YOUR PRESENTATION

After planning your presentation, designing your visual aids, and practicing multiple times, you are almost ready for the real show. But there are a few hurdles to ensure you get over. For example, science blogger, SciCurious (2008) reminds us to “Never, never, please never, begin or end your talk with a variation on ‘it’s my first talk, and I’m totally nervous.’” As SciCurious explains: “In the best-case scenario, we should not be able to tell it was your first talk. We should assume you’ve got lots of experience. Being told that you don’t know what you’re doing doesn’t inspire a lot of confidence. Statements like that don’t earn you sympathy.” I, too, abide by the general rule of thumb to never begin a presentation with an apology – unless the apology is part of your planned hook!

Jerry Weissman (2008) recommends “pausing each time you put on a new slide.” Weissman explains why: “The instant a new image appears on the projection screen, the audience suddenly shifts their attention to the screen and away from the presenter, and they do so *involuntarily*—driven by the reflex actions of their eyes. So focused is the audience on the slide, they do not hear anything the presenter says. There is a simple solution to all of this: Pause. How will the pause feel to you, the presenter? Awful. An eternity. How will that discomfort appear to the audience? They won’t feel it, because they will be focused on the screen.”

Speaking of timing, pace your audience through the components of your slides with the timing of a comedian. Tim K. Lee, an academic turned comedian, illustrates the power of timing in his video, “PowerPoint Comedy” (2007). Note the way Lee presents his first transitional probability graphic at 1:58 (the one about the salmon life history), for which all the information in the graphic is shown simultaneously. That is the way most academics would present such a graphic; they would show the entire graphic and then try to walk the audience through the components. Compare that all-at-once style of simultaneous presentation with Lee’s piece-by-piece style of presentation of a similar graphic starting at 2:23. The piece-by-piece style is more powerful, and there is a reason: Timing during delivery is crucial (which is a skill that comedians know, and academics should hone).

As for other presentation tips, Dorothy Bishop (2011) lists several presentation strategies not to employ. For example, she recommends not “Rapidly flick[ing] through the slides that you don’t have time for” because that “creates a sensation that you could give them far more exciting stuff if only you had more time.” She also recommends not “Spending at least 5 minutes on the Acknowledgements slide” because your audience is not “deeply interested in the many people whom your work depends on, and you should give their name, photograph, country of origin, role in the research, together with a quirky story illustrating their personality.”

My own practice is to show my acknowledgements slide when I ask for questions. That way, people who do not have questions can study the slide, if they want to, but I have not spent any of my precious presentation time on acknowledgments. Calling for questions leads me to my last set of recommendations.

RESPOND TO QUESTIONS DURING AND AFTER YOUR PRESENTATION

During my presentations, I typically welcome only questions that require immediate clarification (e.g., “Did you just say ___?”). I do not begin my presentation, or state elsewhere during my presentation, that I am encouraging the audience to stop me and ask questions at any time. Why not? Because I have spent days preparing my presentation, and the organization I have labored over is the organization that I think best serves the topic. When the audience begins jumping in to ask questions (beyond the need for immediate clarification), they’ve now hijacked my organization and replaced it with their organization — and all of my efforts fly out the window.

Therefore, I recommend strongly against speakers beginning their presentation by inviting questions during it. I think speakers extend that invitation because they think it makes them look more causal or more knowledgeable. Maybe speakers extend the invitation simply because they have seen other speakers do it. But I strongly recommend against it. Giving an engaging, well-organized talk will make a speaker look more knowledgeable than getting sidetracked by questions. Therefore, I never invite questions during my talk, and if an audience member does ask a question that is beyond a need for immediate clarification, I typically respond by saying “I’ll be covering that soon,” (hint, hint) or “Let’s talk about that during the question period” (an even bigger hint).

As for how to respond to questions asked after your presentation, Krobman (2006) recommends that you “Anticipate questions you are likely to be asked. Be able to justify your decisions. Why did you choose one method over another (e.g., between-subject vs. within-subject, interview vs. survey)? Why did you choose one analysis over another (e.g., ANOVA vs. regression)? How would someone who is skeptical of your ‘big idea’ counter your findings? How would you respond?”

Krobman (2006) clarifies the above advice in the following way: “Some questions that you can anticipate will be easy to answer with a sentence or two. ‘Were there gender differences?’ ‘No.’ Other questions are harder to answer. For those, and for general information, prepare extra slides [that you can show] after your talk ... when needed. For example, prepare histograms of each measure. Have complex analyses you did not present. Block quotations from famous papers can be helpful for theoretical points. For example, if you said Piaget claims something, have direct quotations prepared.”

Krobman (2006) also recommends taking time to answer the question. “Questions can be tough, especially when you have not anticipated them. [So, you should take the time right then] to think about the question before you begin to answer it. Silence for ten seconds is nothing for your audience, even when it feels excruciating to you. Avoid filling the time with ‘um’s’ or fidgeting.” I heartily underscore this advice! The most masterful responses to unanticipated questions go something like this. The presenter confesses straightforwardly: “Let me think about that for a moment.” There is silence, which feels ever so brief to members of the audience. Then, the presenter answers the question.

Lastly, Krobman (2006) advises the following strategies for handling what feel like challenging questions (challenging in the sense of opposition, rather than in the sense of mere difficulty). “Even if questions feel like a competition, try to reframe them as collaborative efforts to find out the truth. Help your thoughts flow by acknowledging the question and reframing it as a plan for scientific progress. ‘That is an interesting question because if it is true that ... then I should have found that As I mentioned, I found ...’ Or ‘these results can’t tease apart these possibilities. In a future study we might ... to answer your question.’ Remember that great scientists do not necessarily have truth; great scientists pursue truth.”

CONCLUSION

Over the past decade, I have wondered why developing lively presentations with visual accompaniments, which are supportive illustrations rather than detailed outlines, is so difficult for current students and postdocs. Then, I had an insight: instant coffee. What the heck is instant coffee? It is freeze-dried coffee that comes in a jar, and you mix it with boiling water. How does it taste? To quote from [Wise Geek](#), it tastes “akin to drinking rat poison.” Maybe that is a bit harsh, but instant coffee tastes as similar to brewed coffee as cherry-flavored cough syrup tastes to a bowlful of fresh cherries or as Beggin’ Bacon Strips taste like bacon. It is true that I have never eaten Beggin’ Bacon Strips, but I have had cherry-flavored cough syrup, and I have definitely had my share of instant coffee, and it is awful.

Back in the 1950s and 60s, instant coffee was all the rage. It remained the rage till the early 70s when the world's taste buds were reclaimed by the invention of Mr. Coffee coffee-makers ("automatic drip coffeemakers designed for household use"). How did that happen? Instant coffee per se had been invented during World War II as a convenience to the military. The war-time instant coffee, unlike the instant coffee the general population would later drink, was a powder that did not mix that well or taste that good, but war requires sacrifice. Prior to and apart from the war, the primary means for making coffee was the percolator, usually electric. But percolated coffee took a lot of time to make, and the advent of the 1960s with space food (concoctions placed in toothpaste like tubes) and other fast foods, drove coffee drinkers to want to speed things up. Enter Nescafe and their patented process for freeze drying coffee, and the rest is history.

Trust me; from the time I was a child until I graduated from college, the coffee everyone drank was instant coffee. And it was awful. So why does instant coffee remind me of the contemporary problem with presentations? Well, I think the advent of PowerPoint and the current reliance on PowerPoint and its templates are like the advent of and past reliance on instant coffee. PowerPoint and its templates were designed as a quick way to prepare an entire presentation (just write an outline; PowerPoint will even prompt you for a title and for bullet points!). And they were lauded (and still are) for the fact that if a person misses attending your presentation, you can just send that person your PowerPoint file. The audience does not even need to be there, they do not need to experience the presentation. They can just read what you wrote on your PowerPoint slides. Instant presentation!

Therein lies the rub. Like instant coffee, if making a presentation is that easy and that quick, it is probably not that good. And, like instant coffee, if it is all you have grown up with, as I suspect is the case with PowerPoint for anyone who entered the field after the eighties, it is all you know how to use. Indeed, back during the heyday of instant coffee, it was the older coffee drinkers who remembered coffee before it was instant and who knew there was a better way. Similarly, older audience members like me, who remember back when speakers gave engaging, understandable, and memorable presentations with beautiful 2x2 photographic slides as visual support, know there is a better way. I hope the recommendations in this chapter will lead us back and forward to those better ways.

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