

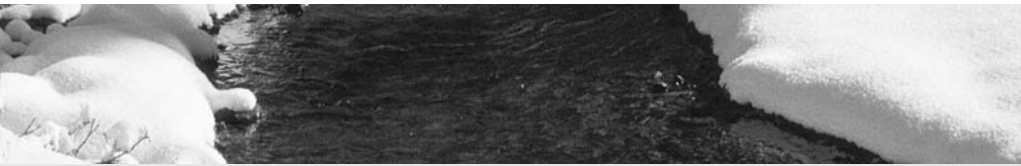


SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

# The Stepping Stone

January 2004 – Issue No. 13



Personal Opinion

# The Perils of PowerPoint Slides

by James Gray

It's the most misused technological innovation since the handgun. It's a major reason why business leaders give less effective speeches and presentations today than they did just a few years ago. It's PowerPoint—and it now ruins more presentations than it helps.

The opportunity to speak publicly in a democratic society, to give free expression to our ideas in an attempt to influence others, has to be one of the greatest privileges ever bestowed on the human race.

In politics and business great speeches build great careers, so I find it incomprehensible that so many undercut the astonishing personal power that comes from connecting with an audience, really connecting, to throw up a collection of hokey slides and read aloud desultory, poorly organized information that members of the crowd can still process faster than the presenter can read.

I suspect that today's addiction to PowerPoint has to do with the fact that most people, even those among the sleek executive set, are unnerved by the preparation and discipline required to speak effectively in public. When PowerPoint came along, many of them figured, "Great. Now I don't have to do all the work of writing and editing a script, which takes forever. I'll just organize a deck of slides covering the main points and address them one by one. I don't even have to know my presentation cold; after all, I'll have my slides right there. This is terrific!"

The advent of this now-ubiquitous technology served a deeper psychological need as well, seemingly protecting the fearful from the oppressive scrutiny of audiences by diverting at

least some attention to visuals, away from the speaker.

Yet this reasoning is wrong. Just as you can feel lonelier at a crowded party than you can in the solitude of your bedroom, PowerPoint, utilized badly, isolates and diminishes you in the eyes of your audience.

PowerPoint was meant to enhance speeches and presentations, not replace them. The best speakers in the world rarely use PowerPoint. They don't need to. They tell their stories the old-fashioned way, with an uplifting combination of words and passion, like former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani.

Okay, so I revile PowerPoint. Since it's unlikely I'll be able to eradicate it during my lifetime and since several of my clients insist on its use (primarily to explain complex or highly-technical matters), I grudgingly toil with the soulless technology. But I have a rule: I run PowerPoint; it doesn't run me.

We're people, admittedly with a plethora of faults and limitations, but our humanity trumps a slide every time. Let's keep that in mind as we consider five basic guidelines for avoiding the PowerPoint perils.

- **Tell a story:** Before the introduction of PowerPoint, a presentation usually involved the telling of a story. It still needs to, but with the aid of visuals rather than words alone. Your deck of slides needs to relate a coherent narrative from beginning to end. Anyone, and not just any member of your audience, should be able to pick up the deck, read the slides and follow your story quickly and easily.

---

**It's a major reason why business leaders give less effective speeches and presentations today than they did just a few years ago. It's PowerPoint—and it now ruins more presentations than it helps.**

---

- **Less is more:** No more than three points on a slide, with no more than five or six words constituting a point. The generally accepted rule of thumb is no more than one slide per minute of presentation time, or 20 slides for a standard 20-minute address.
- **Be prepared:** Take as much pressure off yourself as possible by having a trusted colleague or assistant provide technical support. Have a hard-copy version of your presentation in large, easy-to-read type available if the technology fails. Rehearse often, sometimes delivering your address without referring to your slides. Just in case.
- **Take control:** Establish your presence and credibility by speaking for at least the first minute of your presentation without referring to PowerPoint. (You may want to display a slide featuring your organization's brand or logo as you make eye contact with the audience and let its members know what you're about to tell them, and why it's important to them.) Conclude as you began, speaking to the audience with the first slide up again.
- **The eyes have it:** You need to establish and largely maintain eye contact with members of the audience, invariably a challenge for those PowerPoint presenters distracted by the need to transition in and out of numerous slides. Once you quickly confirm that the proper slide is in place, face the crowd and make your points. Summarize the slide, or expand upon it, or use it as an entry point to provide an important example, but don't read it.

It's all about serving the needs of your audience. Have you ever attended a speech or presentation that was so good, so special, that you didn't want it to end? That's the way I felt last

December, conducting a communications skills workshop with a small group of intellectually challenged adults. They were terrific presenters who told interesting stories with warmth, honesty and plenty of eye contact.

There were four speakers that day, and not a PowerPoint slide among them. □

*James Gray is a communications skills trainer with National Public Relations in Toronto.*

