



By Ellen Finkelstein, CC

# Sidestep the PowerPoint Trap

Recently, I conducted a survey on the topic “Death by PowerPoint.” One respondent wrote: “I think presenters use PowerPoint slides for their own comfort level, not as a communication device for the audience.... I really despise someone flashing bulleted lists and then reading the lists to me.”

**Make every slide a source of pride.**

As a Toastmaster, you know how to create and deliver a speech, or at least you’re well on your way. Yet often when good speakers begin to incorporate Microsoft PowerPoint slides into their speeches, they fall into the “bullet trap.” The results for the presenter can be dismal and can include:

- **Slides** that bore people to sleep.
- **A speech** that is reduced to outline form.
- **A speaker** who relies on reading the slides, just because the text is there.
- **A lost connection** with the audience, because the speaker is looking at the slides instead of making eye contact.

What happens when a presenter displays a slide containing text? The audience sees the text on the slide and reads it. While people are reading, they aren't paying attention to the speaker. Why? Brain research has shown that the brain doesn't multitask very well; it focuses on one thing at a time. Because audience members can read faster than the speaker can talk, they finish early. Then they turn their attention to the speaker and find that he or she is still talking on the subject they've read. So naturally, they're bored!

We know from our own experience that text-based slides aren't very interesting. So why do we often fall into the bullet trap? In a sense, PowerPoint is to blame, because its default slide is a bulleted list. Look at the instruction "Click to add text." PowerPoint is practically ordering you to create bulleted lists!



▪ **Resist the temptation.**

You can avoid the bullet trap by remembering that

PowerPoint is just a visual aid and that bulleted text on a slide is not an effective visual aid. However, most slides should have some text. For motivational and inspirational speeches, one or two words may be enough. For informational and persuasive talks, use a slide title that actually says something. For example, instead of "Results of stress," you could write, "Stress hinders our ability to function." Give audience members a summary of your point quickly so they can immediately turn their attention to your explanation of it.

▪ **Tell 'n' show.** After you add a slide title, how do you fill up the rest of the space? Use images, diagrams or graphs, depending on the point you're making. I call this the Tell 'n' Show<sup>SM</sup> method. This slide illustrates the point.



First, the slide has a title that tells you something – that is, to *tell* the point and then to

*show* it. Then, the photo portrays an example. The little boy is reading a picture book. On one page of the book is the text that *tells* the story. On the other page is an illustration that *shows* the story.

Many presenters rely on the slide backgrounds that come with PowerPoint. These are mostly irrelevant and look old and tired, because we've seen them before. In fact, without a background, your presentation will look more up to date. Creating presentations without backgrounds is a fairly new trend. The best PowerPoint designers are starting with a blank slide and working from there.

▪ **Create a makeover.**

How would you make over a slide like this one? It looks familiar, with a stock background and bulleted text.



It describes the components of a presentation.

One way would be to divide it up into three slides. Putting one point on a slide is a technique that helps you avoid bullets. The three slides might look like this.



This presentation and the images are available for download at the URL given at the end of this article. You can apply the following steps to create the same effect in new shows. Or you can use your own presentation, with minor adjustments to the instructions. Follow these steps in PowerPoint 2002, 2003 or 2007:

1. **Remove the background.** With the slide displayed, click the Design button on the Formatting toolbar (located above the slide) to display the Slide Design task pane on the right. In the Available for Use section, choose the white background; its tooltip reads Default Design.pot. (In PowerPoint 2007, click the Design tab and choose the first blank thumbnail image, called Office Theme.)
2. **Duplicate the slide.** Click the image of the slide in the far left pane and press Ctrl + D (Command + D on the Mac) twice for a total of three slides. The original slide tries to make three points, so you'll now place one point on each slide.

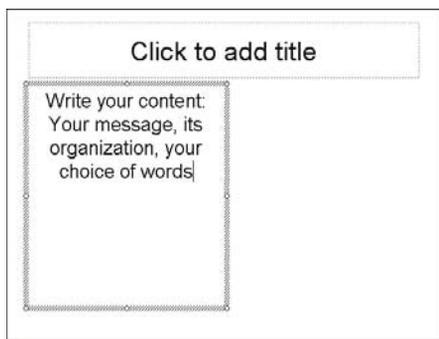
3. **Format the Slide Master.** To get a professional look, you should format the Slide Master, which controls the entire presentation. Once you do, you'll find that you spend less time fussing with the look of individual slides. From the view menu, choose Master> Slide Master. (In PowerPoint 2007, click the View tab and click the Slide Master button. Click the top slide master image in the left-hand pane.)

You can format the text, but for the purpose of this article, click the first line of text in the main box that says, "Click to edit Master text styles." Then click the Bullets button on the Formatting toolbar to remove the default bullets. (In PowerPoint 2007, you'll find that Bullets button on the Home tab.) Select the sub-levels of bulleted text – Second Level through Fifth Level – and press Delete (or Backspace) on your keyboard.

This next step will allow you to center or left-align body text properly. If you don't see a ruler at the top of your slide, choose View> Ruler. (In PowerPoint 2007, choose the View tab> Ruler.) Select the main text in the central box. Notice two gray triangles, an upper and a lower one, near the left side of the ruler. Drag the bottom, gray triangle to the left so that it's aligned with the top triangle. Choose View> Normal from the menu to leave the Slide Master. (In 2007, choose Close Master View on the Slide Master tab.)

4. **Add the text.** You can put the text on the top and a visual component on the bottom (or vice versa), or place them side-by-side. These instructions place them side-by-side. To arrange the text so there's room for an image, click the first slide in the slide pane on the far left. In the larger slide image in the central pane, click anywhere in the text. This slide will contain the first point, so select and delete the second two points.

Edit the text so it contains a complete statement. I wrote: "Write your content: your message, its organization, your choice of words." If you have any text in the title area, delete it. (The instructions to add a title appear, but won't show when you present in Slide Show view.) Click inside the main text box, click the border of the box to select it, and drag the middle-right circular handle to



the center of the slide so that the text takes up the left half of the slide. If you want to center the text, select it all and click the Center button on the Formatting toolbar. (In PowerPoint 2007, the Center button is on the Home tab.) It should look like the slide you see here.

5. **Insert an image.** The next step is to find a visual that will help the audience understand your point. Don't use line art, also known as clip art; use photographs instead. A photo can illustrate the point either literally or metaphorically; it can also add an element of emotion. You can take your own photos – a digital camera is great for this purpose. You can find high-quality photos online on stock photo sites – a few are even free. (See the Web page listed at the end of this article for some sources.) Finally, you can use Microsoft Office's Clip Art library.

To use the images available with the download (described at the end of this article), choose from the Insert menu: Picture> From File, and navigate to the location where you saved the download. (You'll have to unzip the download file first.) Choose the file named content-woman.jpg and click the Insert button in the dialog box.

To use the Microsoft Office Clip Art library instead, you would choose Insert> Picture> Clip Art. Then, in the Clip Art task pane that opens to the far right, click the "Results should be" drop-down list and uncheck everything except Photographs. Then, enter a search keyword in the Search For text box.

6. **Edit the image.** When you insert the image from the download, you'll probably need to move it. Click and drag anywhere on the photo to move it to the desired location; in the example shown, move it to the right of the slide.

If you use your own image, you may need to resize it. To do so, click it to select it, and then drag it by its corner handle. (Caution: If you enlarge a small photo too much, it will look grainy.)

7. **Make final adjustments.** Usually, you'll need to make some final adjustments, to move the text or wrap the words appropriately. With a few minor changes, your slide will look great and be much more powerful!

Repeat the process with the other slides. If you're working with the images in the download, use design-paint.jpg for Slide 2 and delivery-man.jpg for Slide 3.

- **Add a diagram or chart.** Instead of an image, you can add a diagram or chart. PowerPoint has a diagram tool. PowerPoint 2003's diagrams are basic; choose Insert> Diagram. PowerPoint 2007 has vastly improved this feature; choose Insert> SmartArt.

Creating a presentation is a process



The following slide tells us that the three components of a presentation are a process, rather than unrelated items. Now it's time to

show how this idea works by adding a chart.

To add a chart, choose Insert> Chart. PowerPoint's charting feature is too complex to explain in detail, but you should remember to simplify the formatting so that the audience understands the data easily. The tools provided will help you design the right chart for this task.

■ **Practice and deliver.** When you add PowerPoint slides, you need to practice working with the technology, while not losing your connection to your audience. With limited text on the slides, you'll need to use notes or perhaps work harder to present without notes. A quick glance at the slide should be all you allow yourself before you

face the audience and discuss the topic. Practice with your slides until they function to *support* you, rather than *replace* you. Your audience will appreciate your attention!

■ **You are the presentation.** Always remember that you are the presentation; the slides are not the presentation. So be sure to sidestep the PowerPoint trap of bulleted text. By using visual slides to enhance what you're saying, your speeches will be more successful and rewarding. ■

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**Editor's Note:** The author has created a page for Toastmasters at: [www.ellenfinkelstein.com/events/toastmasters.html](http://www.ellenfinkelstein.com/events/toastmasters.html). There you can download the PowerPoint file used in this article as well as the images and a list of online photo sources, and get discounts especially for Toastmasters members.

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