

Death by PowerPoint (continued)

Research suggests that if trainers take steps to ensure their slide-based presentations are devoid of the characteristics most frequently connected to breakouts of Death by PowerPoint (DBP), it's possible to avoid the condition completely, and instead, enjoy many years of engaged audiences and effective trainings.

As a trainer on the path toward developing DBP-proof presentations, the first thing to remember is PowerPoint is a program geared toward creating presentations, not trainings. During a presentation, it's not uncommon for audience members to function as passive listeners. Trainers, on the other hand, generally need an active, engaged audience in order to increase transfer-of-learning and maximize skill-building.

In this sense, it seems like the initial choice to use presentation software for your training is starting you off at a disadvantage, even before creating the first slide. If active learning is the goal, should slide-based presentations be abandoned? Not necessarily.

When PowerPoint was first introduced in the 1990s, it exploded in popularity. The novelty alone was enough to grab and hold the attention of an audience member who may have otherwise spent the time daydreaming. Novelty aside, research is relatively consistent in finding that students prefer being taught using slide-based presentations over other methods, and that they find slide-based presentations engaging.⁶

Slide-based presentations can still be valuable training tools. It's good news for all trainers who are slide-creating-enthusiasts that researchers and communication professionals are focused on finding a fix for DBP.

Like many trainers, these researchers and communication professionals recognize the value of slide-based presentations. They know saving this style of presentation from extinction means addressing the more prevalent characteristics commonly attributed to DPB. It's not an easy task. Some of these characteristics have become almost engrained into the practice of slide-based presentation creation.

Here are a few of the more commonly cited tips and suggestions from an overview of information available online:

PowerPoint slides should function as a supplement to your training, not as the backbone

Resist the temptation to reproduce your training outline onto your slides. If you feel that trainees would benefit from having an outline of your training, create and distribute a handout using a word processing program.

Less is More

When it comes to slide design, the consistent message is that less is more; at least when it comes to how much information is on each slide. Cognitive research suggests it's best to have no more than four "elements" per slide.¹ An "element" is anything added to the slide, other than the background, if the background is not a picture. This includes bullet points, pictures, titles, tables and graphs. Speaking of bullet points, it may be better to avoid them completely.² Instead, use a separate slide for each different piece of information. Above all, avoid blocks of text.³

The number of total slides in a slide-based presentation is less important for engaging the audience, but be realistic with your time constraints. You want to avoid running out of time before the end of your presentation or having to rush through the last couple of slides.⁴

Design is important

To ensure readability for everyone in the room, create a high color-contrast between the color of the slide background and the color of the font. Include real images of people – avoiding clip art when possible. Ergonomic research suggests that 22 point, sans serif font styles are the most readable choices for short word clauses.⁴

Don't distract the audience from the important information

Avoid slide animation² or any unnecessary distractions whenever possible.

This doesn't mean that your presentation needs to be boring. Adding decorative elements that enhance understanding or make information more memorable is not only acceptable; it's encouraged.

Remember - having too much information on a slide is one of the primary triggers of DBP. Ensure that the important information gets through to your audience by leaving out superfluous visuals. Don't feel the need to fill up space on the slides for the sake of filling up space—maintain plenty of white space to help the audience process the information in front of them.⁵

If your training is long, include slides that are intentionally left blank, or almost blank. Research conducted by University of Tennessee Professor Bradley T. Vander-Zaden suggests that an average adults' attention span is only 20 minutes. Help give your audience a visual break to re-charge by transitioning with a blank slide.

Watch Steve Jobs give Apple Keynote presentations

Steve Jobs, the late co-founder of Apple, is remembered for the major part he played in creating the cult of devotees around Apple's computer products. His engaging presentation style was the key to the fervor created during his many Apple Keynote Presentations.

There's so much to learn by watching Jobs' presentations that you could write books on it - and people have. An abundance of analytical information exists, covering even the smallest aspects of Jobs' presentation style. For those who are interested, this information is easily accessible using online searches.

As a short analytical summary, here are four things to notice (and emulate!) if you watch [Steve Jobs present the new iPhone in 2007:](#)

- He presents information as if it were a story;
- He uses slides as supplements to his speaking, and not as an outline or a script;
- He inserts completely blank or almost blank slides into his presentation at key points to signal transitions and to give the audience a brain-break; and
- He constantly re-connects the dots to remind the audience how the key points in his presentation are related.

Be genuinely excited

Even if you only watched a small portion of Steve Jobs' presentation referenced above, it's apparent that he's genuinely excited about what he's presenting. His emotion is contagious.

If you're genuinely excited about the subject that you're training, it can save an otherwise doomed presentation. It could very well be the difference between a serious DBP breakout and a slightly bland, yet tolerable and educational day of training. Even if time prevents you from following all the tips for creating engaging slide-based presentations, being genuinely excited about the skills and competencies you're training is a good starter defense against DBP.

You can prevent DBP, and in the process, increase transfer-of-learning and skill building by making an effort to incorporate research on effective slide-based presentation design into your training.

There is so much more information out there beyond this primer. Please see the Trainer Tips article if you are interested in learning more.

Endnotes:

1. Cowan, N. The magical number 4 in short term memory: A reconsideration of mental storage capacity. *Behavioral & Brain Sciences*, 24, 87-185.
2. Pinol, Melanie. How can I make my PowerPoint presentations amazing? *Lifehacker: Tips, Tricks, and Downloads for Getting Stuff Done*. Accessed at: <http://lifehacker.com/how-can-i-make-my-powerpoint-presentations-amazing-507552122>
3. Salmond, Rob, & David T. Smith. Cheating Death-by-PowerPoint: Effective use of visual aids at professional conferences.
4. Durso, Francis T., Vlad L. Pop, John S. Burnett, & Eric J. Stearman. Evidence based human factors guidelines for PowerPoint presentations. (2011). *Ergonomics in Design*, 19(3). 4-8.
5. Five tips for a great PowerPoint presentation. *Inc.com*. Accessed at: <http://www.inc.com/ss/5-tips-for-a-great-powerpoint-presentation#4>
6. Craig, Russel J., & Joel H. Amernic. PowerPoint presentation technology and the dynamics of teaching. (2006). *Innovative Higher Education*, 31(3), 147-160.