

Creating PowerPoint slides

PowerPoints (ppt) are the most frequent documents created in the corporate world – yet too often used to confuse rather than help decision making. In this section I'd like to share some easy tips and tricks to create better slides. Each of these elements is a check-box so you can use them to pressure test the quality of the slide. [What is not covered here is creating good documents that tell a story]

Formatting:

Your goal is that the reader gets the key messages jumping at her at the first glance. Therefore everything that you put on the slide needs to have a meaning; business PowerPoint is not about creativity but about using visual elements and structure to reinforce a message and help you communicate your thoughts efficiently and effectively.

- Use as few style elements as possible:** the reader will try to associate every style element with a meaning: color, font size and style, layout, numbering etc. Therefore check that you use the minimum set of style elements possible to avoid distraction
- One font size:** The main body of the slide can only use one font size. Yes, ONLY ONE font size. It is difficult and the newer versions of PowerPoint don't make it easier with the text in boxes scaling automatically. If you are not used to this approach force yourself; mark all text and set it to font size 14, then reduce the amount of text until it becomes a slide you can read. There are only 2 exceptions: title (a larger font-size), and footnote/legend/tracker (font size 10)
- Maximum font size:** no slide should need to have text with font size 10 or less (see also section content). Aim for 14+ font size
- Up to 2 font styles:** vary them as little as possible. Use standard and only ONE additional style (bold or italics, not both); don't underline as it creates an additional visual element with the line
- Cover "real-estate":** don't leave white space to make your slide a piece of art when you can maximize the font size and make it easier to read; you want people to get a message, not to remember a beautiful slide
- Correct alignment:** use the alignment tools extensively. Even distribution, aligned text elements create harmony and minimize distraction
- Use colors for pattern recognition:** there is no need to stay black & white (as it used to be in consulting). However, use colors to give meaning and in service of the reader, i.e. for pattern recognition across slides. E.g. all positive elements are in blue and all negative ones in red; all actions are highlighted in orange boxes throughout the document; you have 3 themes and each one is represented in a different color throughout the document. These are illustrative examples only. Chose the colors that match your topic / company
- Sufficient contrast:** make sure that there is sufficient contrast between text and background. Green on light green is really hard to read...
- Numbering, bullet points:** both need to have a meaning and be necessary. If you have a single bullet point, then you don't need a bullet. If you have sufficient space to separate bullets from

each other clearly, why add a bullet upfront?

Generally numbering should help connect content across slides. If you have 3 elements that are covered in more detail in subsequent slides, number them. If you use numbers, make sure that they only have one meaning throughout the document; e.g., core elements are numbered 1,2,3 throughout, sub-elements are i,ii,iii. It can confuse the reader very quickly if you re-use 1,2,3 in one slide for several content hierarchies

- **Layout:** there are complete books on this topic (see e.g., Zelasny). Two key principles:
 1. make sure it is obvious how to read the slide (top-down or left-right)
 2. Do lay-out the page, don't just dump text on the slide
- **Single line bullet points:** avoid line breaks in bullet points, in particular if there are only one or two words on the second line. Some tricks
 - Synthesize
 - Replace "and" with "&"
 - Change text style to keywords rather than sentences
 - Find alternative words that are shorter

Content:

- **Single minded message:** you want people to remember what you are saying. Thus there is a single so-what message in every page that is clear from the lead and the layout of the page.
- **Crisp, short messages:** the art is to synthesize and crystalize the content, not to entertain. Push yourself to de-word and sharpen the message multiple times. Apply the trick of selecting all text and increasing font-size until you are convinced that further distilling will miss the mark.
- **Consistent language:** the first word in a bullet is consistently a verb or a noun. I.e., if you use verbs in one bullet, then do so in all.
- **Synthesis:** sharpen your language to get the key message across. Test by asking yourself; how would I interpret this message, can I write it shorter, are there redundant words in it?