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# **Five Tips for Building Better PowerPoint Presentations**

*Data Use Resource*

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## Purpose

The use of Microsoft PowerPoint for presentations is ubiquitous. As a tool for presenting information, PowerPoint has many limitations. But PowerPoint is also easy to use, available on school computers, and familiar to most audiences. In this *Data Use Resource*, we discuss five tips for enhancing the quality of your PowerPoint presentations.

## Contact

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## Content

This *Data Use Resource* covers five tips for building a better PowerPoint presentation, focused on both construction and delivery. Although there is no universally right or wrong method to use for presentations, these ideas are drawn from research and best practices in education and other disciplines. Feel free to use them together or individually to help make your presentations as strong as possible.

### **Tip #1: Create a story based on your audience, purpose, and key messages**

Your presentation should tell a story to your audience, with a defined purpose and key takeaway messages. To do so, you need a clear narrative arc, with a beginning, middle, and end. Different audiences call for different presentation styles and structures; for example, a presentation to school staff might include student-level data that parents cannot access, while a parent presentation may focus on more background information to put a particular issue in context. The purpose of a presentation also guides its structure. A presentation designed mainly to convey information would probably focus on the clearest way to show that information, while a presentation designed to help collect feedback might start with some slides designed to encourage creativity and put people in the right frame of mind to share their ideas. Once you have the audience and purpose decided, you can then move to identifying the key messages you want your audience to understand after the presentation is done. A good guideline for a presentation is to make sure your audience walks out understanding 3-5 things; any fewer and your presentation probably had room for more ideas; any more and you risk losing your focus.

### **Tip #2: Use PowerPoint to complement other resources, not replace them**

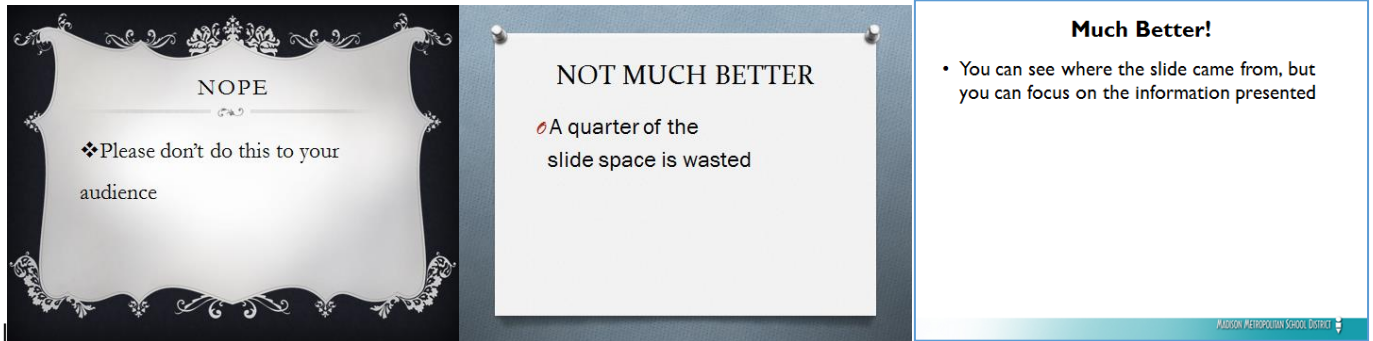
PowerPoint is a convenient tool, but it is not designed to present incredibly detailed information. Most ideas call for and deserve more attention than a bulleted list or a set of slides, so use PowerPoint as a way to complement another resource or resources, particularly written documents with sentences, explanation, and context for more detailed information. Data presentation experts have written at length about how poor PowerPoint presentations have had incredibly serious consequences, including [this piece on how poor PowerPoint presentations contributed to the Columbia disaster in 2003](#). Although our presentations in MMSD probably do not have the same life and death consequences, it is a great example of what can happen when PowerPoint is used as a substitute and not a complement. Some of the best presentations treat PowerPoint as little more than a sophisticated overhead projector, with slides supplemented by handouts as needed. One way to ensure that your presentation is used as a complement is to take advantage of hyperlinks. You can use hyperlinks to link to larger documents or materials that are posted online so people accessing

your slides electronically can find those resources. It is a great way to make sure that your slides do not need to act alone when there are complementary materials available.

### Tip #3: Pay attention to design

As with any presentation, you want people focused on the information and the design of a slide goes a long way in making that happen. By making smart design choices, you can create slides that encourage engagement and comprehension, without overloading the audience. There are lots of easy ways to make this happen, including:

- *Templates that maximize space* - Lots of PowerPoint presentations from organizations will include a logo or some kind of standard formatting at the top and bottom of each slide, but that formatting should provide ample space for content. Go with a white background whenever possible – it is much easier to read.



- *Easy to read text* – Dark text on light background tends to be the easiest for anyone to read. Keep your font large, striving for a minimum of 18 point so that anyone in the room can read it, and limit the numbers of words on a slide. If you have to reduce your font size to fit the content, that likely means you have too many words – consider rewording to be more concise and to key in on the main points. Limiting words forces the audience to focus on your oral presentation, rather than reading the slides.
- *Visuals that add value* – Slides filled with nothing but bulleted point text can lose an audience quickly. Use images when they add value, which can include supplementing an idea or replacing text altogether. Avoid standard clipart, which rarely conveys any useful information, and instead focus on visuals that are unique and pertinent to your presentation.
- *Complementary color choices* – When choosing colors to use in your presentation, focus on colors that look good together. Thankfully, if your eye for complementary colors is not sharp, you can use [websites like this](#) or [this](#) to find complementary colors to use that go along with the main color you're using. If you are not sure which colors to use, consider using the official MMSD teal (R 23 G 157 B 171, web hex 179dab) or your school's colors. Using a consistent and complementary color scheme in your presentation is a simple and subtle way to make it visually appealing.
- *Avoiding pointless animation* – While many presenters may think animation can engage the audience, it actually adds even more separation between the presenter and the participants. Animation ideally should be reserved only for situations like revealing the answer to a question, when there actually is some suspense about what is being revealed, or for making sure your audience is focused on the right part of your presentation instead of reading ahead. Animations like slide transitions and images or text that fly onto the screen typically are distracting.



**Tip #4: Bring your audience into the presentation**

The audience wants to engage with your presentation, so give them that opportunity. Create situations in your slides that encourage engagement with the content, including chances for reflection, conversation, and those “a-ha” moments. In addition, keep in mind that the audience can handle more complex content than you think. Presenters often underestimate the ability of their audience to understand complex information and forget that sometimes a few slides with a lot to digest, ideally presented visually, can keep an audience much more engaged than a large set of content-light slides. Not every idea is best expressed through three bullet points, so get creative and see what you can produce. Finally, limit your total number of slides. A good rule of thumb is at least 1-2 minutes per slide, and even longer can be appropriate with proper delivery; with that in mind, a 20 minute presentation should have no more than 20 slides. If you respect your audience's capacity to take in and engage with information, you will get better results in return.

**Tip #5: Practice, practice, practice**

The best presenters can draw anyone into the presentation; in many ways, they have become excellent storytellers. People are not born with that ability – it can be crafted through practice. To develop that skill, you must continually work at delivering the content in an engaging way. To start, write up some key points that you want to emphasize with each slide and practice delivering those ahead of time. It is often more beneficial to practice the way you will explain an idea, as opposed to practicing a specific set of words over and over again, so your final presentation feels more natural. Keep the text on screen to a minimum and fight the urge to read any content verbatim; it is best to think of the text on each slide as a skeleton that gets the basic point across, but not as a script that tells you everything you're going to say. Instead, engage in a conversation with your audience that is based on, but not dependent upon the slides. Vary your delivery, considering when to pause and when to change your volume and tone for effect. The goal is to be both personable and in control of the content, which will inspire confidence and enthusiasm from your audience. Practice navigating your slides in a non-linear fashion, moving backwards and forwards with ease to answer audience questions or return to content later as ideas emerge. By practicing, you become more comfortable with the content and can focus on delivery and engagement. This approach is incredibly helpful when technology fails on you – which happens more often than we care to consider.