# The perils of PowerPoint

**Presentation software is used by churches to project the words of hymns and songs, to display liturgy and so avoid the need for service books or sheets, and to support sermons, training sessions and other speaker-events.**

**These notes are concerned mainly with the use of Microsoft's PowerPoint to support a talk or sermon, although much of what is covered will apply to other uses too.**

It is not difficult to find enthusiasts for PowerPoint's use as a teaching tool.  But before you join the club, be aware that there is another side to the argument, less frequently expressed.  This can be summarised in two broad principles.

First, the underlying belief that this tool can make a poor speaker better has to be challenged.  This is simply not true!  PowerPoint is a visual ***aid***; it is an excellent servant but a poor master.  If used well it can help a good speaker get some types of message across effectively.  Unfortunately, it can also make a poor speaker lazy and utterly boring, especially when it becomes little more than a set of notes to speak from.  Many know from their workplace that PowerPoint presentations (from the finance department or elsewhere) are often monotonous.

The second point relates to projection.  The screen is usually larger and more visible than the speaker.  So the screen dominates.  When something is not quite visually right with the speaker, this can damage the message but the effect may not be disastrous.  When there is something wrong with the projection (eg. the next slide refuses to come on), the impact on the audience is much greater.  The intended message is easily smothered.

So, with a heavy heart and a tear in my eye, I feel it is my duty to tell you about ten of my friends who, between them, show just how dangerous a tool PowerPoint can be.

## 1     Alistair does two things at once

We take in messages in quite different ways depending on whether we listen to Alistair speaking or read his slides, so it is not straightforward to do both at the same time. When Alistair reads out the exact words on the screen, people quickly nod off.  But when he puts up a new slide and goes on speaking with different words, confusion reigns.  Everyone tries to read the screen but Alistair's voice is a clear distraction.

## 2     Amy loses eye contact

The contact between Amy's eye and the audience is crucial for good communication. So once she plays around with the laptop or the remote control, unless done in the blink of an, er, eye, that vital contact is broken.  More importantly when Amy turns round to check what is on the screen, not only has eye contact gone, her face is replaced by her rear view – which is simply not her best feature.

## 3     Adrian gives instructions

So to overcome loss of eye-contact, Adrian has someone to operate the laptop for him. The trouble is that his constant commands such as, "Next slide, please", "No, could we go back to the last but one", and "Could you stop the bullet points at No. 3", can be just as distracting as Amy's problem.  His coded signs are not much better unless visible only to himself and the operator.

## 4     Alana writes too much

Alana crams each slide with as much as she can fit in.  She frequently has seven bullet points each with a full sentence.  Not only does this mean that the font size is too small for easy reading at the back of the room, but the amount of detail is just too much for the human brain to cope with.  Slides should be (to repeat the point) visual aids for a talk, not Alana's lecture notes.

## 5     Adam uses too many slides

Adam's sermon with six points all with seven sub-points each with three sub-sub-points is a 126-point talk.  Quite.  Printed notes might do the trick (well, perhaps), but his congregation have normal human limitations on a Sunday morning.  When Adam whips through the slides at speed, his listeners become exhausted.  They start by reading the screen without attending to him, but then collapse in a stupor.

## 6     Anita lacks design skills

The design of each slide needs to be good enough for people to get the message rather than see the slide.  Design serves the wording or the visual which is what matters.  So when Anita chooses yellow-based colours for text on a white background (very hard to read), or small fonts, or detailed background pictures, or when her words are misspelled or line breaks go awry, the visual aid has stepped out of the shadows and is masking the message it is seeking to serve.

## 7      Aaron loves gimmicks

Sadly, PowerPoint gives Aaron a myriad of options for slide transitions and the introduction of new text.  He thinks they're all great fun.  His audience have seen them all before and find them dead boring.  More distractions.  Aaron: use something simple next time – unless it's a zany all-age talk.

## 8      Alice ignores note-takers

Everyone is furiously trying to copy down Alice's slide before it changes, but she's got no time to wait.  She should tell them there will be printed notes available afterwards – or she is no better than Alistair in point 1.  There is value in people writing rather than just reading, but the losses can outweigh the gains.

## 9      Andy suffers from poor equipment

In Andy's church building the screen is miles above his head. In the hall it is mounted on the floor so that people at the back cannot see it because of those in front of them.  To make matters worse, Andy wanders around in front of the light beam, so casting vast and exciting shadows on the screen.  Oh, and he forgot that the bright image he sees on his computer becomes a pale imitation on the big church screen because the projector is not powerful enough and there is sunlight beaming in.

## 10     Alisha struggles with the technology

And it shows!  She finds there is no signal and fiddles around trying to work out why, she has a 2019 Office PowerPoint and the set-up is only for 2003, her memory stick appears to be blank, her remote control batteries are flat, she cannot remember how to wire up the projector…..  The distraction factor in all this is huge.  Oh, where's that blackboard and chalk?

I'm choked!  I really cannot bear to tell you about Alec, April, Arthur, Angela and other friends of mine, getting it all wrong.

You still want to use this tool, you say?  OK – you're right, it can be used well.  Here are some of the key principles which arise from the dangers listed above, although I suspect I have given you enough hints already to make a significant difference.  There is much more that could be said but this is for starters.

## A      Default to no PowerPoint

Assume that the norm is ***not*** to have a slide presentation.  Then add it when you feel it will enhance the talk you have now prepared.

## B      See it as merely an aid

What matters is the message and the speaker.  PowerPoint can clarify a talk's structure, underline key points and add illustrations (see below).  It is always a servant.  Once it becomes the main thing, all is lost.  So learning to be a good speaker, putting your message across clearly and enthusiastically, comes first.

## C    Keep it very simple

Use as few text slides as possible, with as few bullet points as possible (or even none at all), with as few words as possible (single key words or very short phrases are better than prose).  Make sure you avoid most of the clever effects that you are tempted to adopt – unless this is an all-age talk or hype is what you want.

## D    Hide it as far as you can

Minimise all distraction so that the task of changing slides is as invisible as possible.  This may mean a monitor for the speaker and a hand-held changer, but it is often better for a distant operator to have the speaker's notes clearly showing when to change each slide and let the speaker forget the screen is even there.

## E    Let it show the plan

One valuable use of such presentation software is to give an overview.  If you want to remind people of the four points to date, pop them up on a slide (don't go backwards – add an extra slide into the sequence).  You can also summarise at the end – leave the seven key words up during a time of silence or prayer.

## F    Back it up with hand-outs

Low-tech it may be, but if you want people to have the detail, provide it for them in well-designed print, and tell them they can pick it up at the end so there is no need to take notes.  Screen is for immediate effect, print is for permanent detail.

## G    Use it for visuals

So far these notes have focused on text slides (perhaps including some simple diagrams, limited pictures or visual background).  But its key value is to add visual images that create an atmosphere that enables learning, or which give breaks in the text by introducing humour or (literally) illustrations.  Beware well-worn clip art, though, and remember that most web photos have copyright protection. Use a copyright-free source such as https://unsplash.com.

### Footnotes

1    It is worth bearing in mind the value of PowerPoint for those who are hard of hearing.  Some of that would conflict with what I have written above.  But then there are those whose eyesight is not what it might be and the presentation may be lost on them.

2    When it comes to songs and liturgy (the main use in churches), one danger is that each slide only contains a short section of the wording, so it focuses attention on saying the right words rather than on the shape of the whole.  On a printed page you can cast your eye over the whole, or see all the verses of a hymn.  This can be true of talks too – hence point E above.

3    These notes have not included any discussion of the use of video clips and other moving visuals.  These can add much – although can become further distractions.

4    PS: All my friends are only names for myself, at some stage in my PowerPoint usage.  But please don't let on…..

These notes are available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index then TN52.  See also Articles A19, *Speaking so that people listen*, and A39, *A plan for your communications,* plus Training Notes TN82, *Print or screen?,* TN123, *Speaking-to-camera tips,* and TN145, *Illustrating what you say.*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration.  File TN52 under Communication.

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