

Journal Pre-proof

I Hear You, But I Can't Read Your Slides: Tips for Creating a Basic PowerPoint Presentation

Joel D. Brown

PII: S0002-9343(22)00896-8
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2022.12.005>
Reference: AJM 16989



To appear in: *The American Journal of Medicine*

Received date: 7 December 2022
Accepted date: 8 December 2022

Please cite this article as: Joel D. Brown, I Hear You, But I Can't Read Your Slides: Tips for Creating a Basic PowerPoint Presentation, *The American Journal of Medicine* (2022), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2022.12.005>

This is a PDF file of an article that has undergone enhancements after acceptance, such as the addition of a cover page and metadata, and formatting for readability, but it is not yet the definitive version of record. This version will undergo additional copyediting, typesetting and review before it is published in its final form, but we are providing this version to give early visibility of the article. Please note that, during the production process, errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.

© 2022 Published by Elsevier Inc.

Commentary**I Hear You, But I Can't Read Your Slides: Tips for Creating a Basic PowerPoint Presentation**

Joel D. Brown MD

University of Hawaii John A. Burns School of Medicine

2333 Lusitana Street 7th Floor, Honolulu HI 96813

e-mail jobroid@gmail.com

Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: None

Sole author is responsible for all content.

Article Type: Commentary

Key Words: Education, Communication

Running Head: I Can't Read Your Slides

A colleague recently watched a national virtual meeting on-line, but he had trouble reading many of the slides, particularly the detailed data slides. We have all probably watched online PowerPoint slide presentations in which the written text, tables, and graphs, were difficult or impossible to read on our computer screens. The presenters often apologize with "I know you can't read this." The current COVID-19 pandemic led to many virtual PowerPoint presentations where speakers frequently used slides crowded with lots of information printed with a small text size that was difficult to read. Journal articles often include tables and graphs that can't be easily read in a PowerPoint slide presentation. I suspect all of us have had similar experiences with medical Grand Rounds and other educational sessions. Despite this problem, few medical organizations train their staff how to create effective presentations with PowerPoint or similar programs.

During the past several years, Joseph S. Alpert, MD, Editor-in-Chief, The American Journal of Medicine, has addressed a failure in medical communication in teaching exercises and scientific presentations that use PowerPoint.¹ He warns against using “Slides crammed full of information and typed in a small font size that make it impossible to comprehend the point being made by the slide.” Years later, Alpert further advised that slides should contain a maximum of 7 lines, with about 7 words per line, liberal use of images, and easy to read graphs.² Chatterjee and colleagues³ offer detailed advice for creating slides, and warn against delivering too much complex information in too short a time, and reading from boring slides filled with small text so dull that some describe as “death by PowerPoint.”

Several recent journal articles offered excellent advice on how to use PowerPoint presentations for medical teaching and conferences. Zhornitskiy and colleagues⁴ warn that “Clashing, garish colors, large blocks of text, nonstandard fonts, small type size, and intricate diagrams should all be avoided, but are common errors that constitute the dreaded “busy slide.” Grech⁵ offers useful advice on optimizing PowerPoint presentations for medical audiences.

PowerPoint is an intimidating program that was not specifically designed for medical presentations. Medical users often mistakenly select a presentation style from among the 20 or so styles offered by PowerPoint, most of which have excessive decorations, title slides with font sizes that are too large, and text content slides with font sizes that are too small. Many of these slides have useless borders, garish geometric designs, and oversized title placeholders that take up some 25% of the slide text space.

I offer some advice for those who only occasionally create PowerPoint presentations for medical case conferences, Grand Rounds, and similar occasions. To begin, create a PowerPoint template with several formatted slides to use for your current and future presentations.

1. On your computer, find the Microsoft Office program icons, and click on the red icon marked “P” to open the PowerPoint program. You will be greeted with “Good afternoon,” below which is a row of “New” presentation styles. Choose the first icon

which is colorless. Ignore the other presentation styles which are usually inappropriate for a medical presentation.

2. Click on the colorless “Blank Presentation” and a Title slide appears and a smaller version of the same slide appears in a narrow vertical column on the left.
3. The first slide is labeled “Click to add title.” This slide has blank placeholders for the presentation Title, followed by a line for the authors’ name, then a line for the author’s organization. Use a common font, e.g., Arial, with font sizes about 44 for the title and about 36 for the author, and a smaller font size for their institution.
4. On the large horizontal screen above, click on “New Slide.” Several slide formats appear. Choose the second format “Title and Content.” A new slide appears with placeholders for the individual slide title and for content text below. Use about a bold 36-size font for the slide title, and a 32-size font for the content text below. Limit the content text to 4 to 6 lines with under 10 words per line. You can elaborate on the slide content during your oral presentation.
5. Slides with text and images often enhance communication. To create such slides, return to the left vertical column, copy the previous Text and Content slide, and create a new slide with a place for text and a place for an image. On this slide, narrow the text place holder width to about 50% to provide a space to insert previously copied tables, images, radiographs, blood smears, etc.
6. To show larger images e.g., maps, tables, etc., click on New Slide again. On this slide, delete the place holder entirely and insert the image, Be sure images with text are easily readable. Avoid including complex algorithms or graphs that often take a whole page of a journal document and cannot be easily read on one PPT slide.
7. Save this slide collection as “My Master PowerPoint Template” to use to create new presentations.
8. Now, you are be ready to create new PowerPoint presentations with simple black text on a white background, which is what we see in medical journals. Create presentations that are appropriate for your audience, e.g., medical students, residents, or generalists. Make liberal use of PowerPoint slides with images. Encourage audience participation during your presentation. Finish with a summary

slide followed by time for audience comments and questions. No one will complain if you finish early.

Despite years of criticism of PowerPoint use in medical communication, few academic medical programs offer training in how to use PowerPoint. As a first step, departments of medicine could identify a staff member, with PowerPoint expertise, to create a simple PowerPoint template for Department members to use for conferences, Grand Rounds, etc. Once PowerPoint presentations are improved, perhaps we can eradicate the current endemic of “Death by PowerPoint.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

REFERENCES

1. Alpert JS. Some simple rules for effective communication in clinical teaching and practice environments. *Am J Med.* 2011;124(5):381-382. doi:10.1016/j.amjmed.2010.11.026
2. Alpert JS. So, You Have to Give a Lecture-Are You Anxious?. *Am J Med.* 2019;132(5):545-546. doi:10.1016/j.amjmed.2018.11.024
3. Chatterjee D, Yaster M, Lockman JL, et al. Challenging the status quo of scientific presentations. *Paediatr Anaesth.* 2021;31(2):116-122. doi:10.1111/pan.14064
4. Zhornitskiy A, Nguyen A, Kaunitz JD. PowerPoint to the People: The Four Secrets to Delivering a Great Medical Talk. *Dig Dis Sci.* 2020;65(7):1892-1894. doi:10.1007/s10620-020-06273-8
5. Grech V. WASP (Write a Scientific Paper): Optimization of PowerPoint presentations and skills. *Early Hum Dev.* 2018;125:53-56. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2018.06.006