Extreme Makeover: PowerPoint Edition – Season 2
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Using the reality TV show as our inspiration, Mary and Rebecca decided to seek out IR colleagues who are facing hardships and are in need of hope as well as a makeover of a PowerPoint presentation. We ultimately selected Mona Levine from the University of Maryland, and a presentation she has given at conferences about the benefits of choosing or seeking out non-traditional roles for an Institutional Research office.

These are the first five slides in the presentation.

The first thing to remember is that it's all about communication. We present in order to provide information to an audience. We want that audience to learn from us, to understand something new or different. If the audience doesn’t know or care about our topic when the presentation ends, then we have not communicated and it was not a successful presentation. Thus, we should want to do take every advantage to maximize the chances for successful communication.

Your job as presenter is to sell, to make a point, to get people excited about your ideas. Seth Godin says “if all you want to do is create a file of facts and figures, then cancel the presentation and send in a report.”

Not only does our content have to be interesting, it should have an emotional component. Our brains have two sides. The right side is emotional and creative; the left side is analytical. The most effective presentations will engage both sides of a person’s brain to provide information, as well as inspiration and entertainment.

Note: Through the rest of this handout, this icon indicates the slide is an example of bad design, even if the content is good.
Lay a Firm Foundation

1. Answer the questions: What’s my point? Why does it matter?
Before you create the first slide, you should identify the main point of your presentation. What is the single most important message you want your audience to take away? Then as you create the content for your presentation, step back and ask yourself, “does this slide really contribute to my main point?” If not, consider revising and removing it.

The second question is “Why does it matter?” Not why does it matter to you, but why does it matter to your audience? Too many presenters simply tell the story of what they did on their campus. And while that may be interesting, it’s not very effective in getting your audience involved emotionally. It is much more effective to describe how your experience can be adapted by your audience to impact their institution. Tell the story in a way that makes it matter to the audience.

Select an “Architectural Style”

2. Use an appropriate template.
Avoid PowerPoint templates. Most templates contain distracting elements such as borders or shading that can detract from your message. Strive for simplicity and readability.

Exclude all non-essential items. Be sure that your slides don’t have logos or other non-essential items such as footers and dates. It’s best to create a template that consists only of a solid background. Keep the focus on what you want to communicate and not on how that message is decorated. When creating your template, keep in mind the advice of French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, “A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away”

Choose color combinations promote readability. If your audience is unable to read your slides, then your message has been compromised. If you will be presenting in a darkened room, then light text on a dark background works well. But if you will be in a room with the lights on or with ambient light, then dark text on a light background works better.

Select a sans serif font. Sans serif fonts (translated as “without serifs”), such as Calibri, Arial and Trebuchet, produce a cleaner, less cluttered, easier to read look. Serif fonts, such as Garamond, Times New Roman or Century Schoolbook, have protruding “feet” (called serifs) that extend beyond the main shape of the letters. The serifs are beneficial in printed documents with a lot of text, but they will be blurred on the screen.

(Be sure to select standard fonts or embed fonts in your presentation. If the fonts you use are not installed on the presentation machine, it will use a substitute font, which can change the look of your presentation.)

Use fonts that are 24 point or larger. Displaying text that is too small to read will compromise your message and frustrate your audience. If you have more text than can reasonably fit on a screen using at least 24 point fonts, then either: create another slide or shorten your text.

The following are before, during and after title slides from the Maryland presentation. The most visually interesting things on the “before” page are not related to the content of her presentation. The yellow draws our eyes down to the bottom of the page and away from the title of the
presentation. If communication is the transfer of emotion, then there’s not a lot of emotion here. The font sizes are big enough, but the title font in black is a serif font that is a harder to read than the sans serif font in red.

Mona’s staff revised the slide. The revision is more memorable and interesting and only uses sans serif fonts, but it still has a couple of non-essential elements. When you look at this page, the turtle shell and the title draw all the attention and block the picture in the background.

The “after” revision retains the interest with the picture, but makes it the most prominent element by using a partially transparent background color. And by removing the non-essential items, the photo and the title, which have an obvious connection, are what keep your attention. Though the turtle shell is non-essential by design standards, it is important to Mona that the school logo be shown. While best practices would tell us to remove it, there are times when you make exceptions to the rules.

![Before](image1.png) ![Revised](image2.png) ![After](image3.png)

**Design a Framework**

3. **Use effective visual images.**

Research has shown that communication is enhanced when a verbal message is combined with a powerful image on the screen. If you want people to listen to you and remember what you said, find visual images that emotionally connect with the audience.

*Use high quality photos.* Many free files are available on-line (but pay attention to copyrights) and a plethora of professional photos are available at very reasonable costs (such as at iStockphoto.com).

*Avoid clip art,* since it can make your presentation look dated and unprofessional. Incorporating your text into the photo presents a more unified and visually pleasing message than having them completely separate.

The following are before and after slides from the Maryland presentation:
4. **For charts and graphs: Simplify, simplify, simplify.**

People often want to use graphics and 3-D images to make their charts and graphs look fancy. “decorate” their data, when in fact those techniques actually obscure the message. This alone is a big topic. The basic thing to remember is that you should simplify your charts so they are clear and focus on the data you want your audience to understand.

5. **Minimize use of text.**

Rather, keep narrative in your oral presentation and **off the screen.** It’s nearly impossible for a presenter – even the most experienced presenter – to not read a slide that contains complete sentences. **People cannot listen and read at the same time,** which means that communication is inhibited when the same words are spoken and displayed on screen, especially since we read faster than we speak (Paivio, 2007). Most people speak at 150 words per minute and read at 250 words per minute, which means if you have lots of words on your slides, people can read faster than you can speak.

In addition to the general rule of minimizing the use of text, you should also **use bullet points sparingly.** Garr Reynolds said “Your presentation is for the benefit of the audience. But boring an audience with bullet point after bullet point is of little benefit to them.”

If you want to use an outline to organize your talk, keep it on paper rather than putting it on screen. Many times bullet points serve as prompts to the presenter, so not having them makes things more challenging, but not having them will be more effective in communicating with the audience.
The following are before and after slides from the Maryland presentation. The original simply uses bullet points, which are fairly dry, to present the information. The revised version introduces the idea of non-traditional management in the first slide and the distinction between formal and informal loans in the second.

6. **Eliminate the use of headings or titles unless they communicate the main message.**

   Headings should not be used to introduce or identify the topic of the slide, though they may be useful to call attention to the main finding in a chart or graph. Otherwise, they tend to be redundant and should be deleted.

7. **Use animation, slide transitions, audio, and video sparingly.**

   ..and if used, do so only to reinforce a key concept. No examples are provided because they would be difficult to illustrate in this written format. Research has shown that when there is movement on the screen, the audience’s attention is immediately drawn to the movement, thus breaking their concentration on the presentation content. Audiences judge presentations on their interest in the content, not on how many fancy features are used in the slides. Because it is extremely difficult to portray movement in a static document like this, we cannot provide examples of the before and after slides associated with this tip.

8. **Highlight the most important information.**

   By highlighting the most important information and presenting only as much data as can be readily understood, the audience will easily be able to discern the main message. Slide transitions can be used to “build” your content incrementally and focus your audience’s attention. See Paradi (2009) for an example of using builds to present a chart in PowerPoint.
A more fundamental way to highlight information and draw attention to that information is by the use of color, larger fonts, or boldface. Since color is the most complicated, the following is a brief introduction.

Color has three basic properties. *Hue* is the name of the color. *Value* refers to how light or dark the hue is and *intensity* refers to how bright or dull the hue is. These qualities are independent of each other. Any hue can be light, mid-tone, or dark; any hue can be intense or neutral.

We all likely remember the color wheel from grade school and that the primary colors are Red, Blue and Yellow, which are organized in a triangle on the wheel. Nested between the primary colors are the secondary colors of Purple, Green, and Orange.

Colors that appear on opposite sides of the color wheel are *complementary colors*. The primary combinations are Red/Green, Orange/Blue, and Purple/Yellow. When placed next to each other, complementary colors appear brighter and their intensity is heightened. Color schemes based on complementary color can result in “vibrations” that are distracting and difficult to look at. As shown here, the middle set is more difficult to read than either of the other two. This complementary combination makes the text hard to read.

*Analogous colors* are next to each other on the color wheel. Generally speaking analogous colors tend to create harmony or unity, but you may need more contrast.

One important thing to remember is that *color is contextual* and we understand it in relation to its environment (Bowers, 1999). In other words, an individual color will change as the colors surrounding it change. These grey boxes are all the same color, but when they are surrounded by different colors they seem different. Specifically, the one on the left looks a lot darker than the one on the right. So a color may be right in one context but not in another.

All colors have a “*temperature*”, which refers to its relative warmth or coolness. The temperature of colors can add an emotional message to the graphic and affects how they appear on the page.

- *Cool colors* like purple, blue and green tend to have a calming effect. They appear smaller than warm colors and visually recede on the page.
- *Warm colors* energize rather than calm and appear more prominent than cool counterparts. So, a red can visually overpower a blue, even if used in equal amounts.
- *Neutral colors* of black, white, silver, gray, and brown put the focus on other colors or tone down colors that might otherwise be overpowering on their own.

To use color to highlight information, use brighter colors, darker colors, or colors with a warmer hue.

*Curb Appeal*

We choose our news stations at least partly for the personality of and our emotional attachment to the person presenting the news, whether that person is Diane Sawyer, Brian Williams, Scott Pelley or Jon Stewart. The “personality” of your presentation can be as important as the content.


Regardless of how well designed your slides are, the success or failure of your presentation will hinge on how effectively you engage your audience. Within reason and in a way that fits your personality, be passionate about your topic. If the audience can’t tell that the topic you’re presenting is interesting to you, it won’t be interesting to them. The slides should serve to enhance your oral presentation, let them help you. Bullet points are not passionate, not even if they’re highly decorated.
Start your presentation with a bang. Did you know most audience members have made up their mind about your presentation by the third slide? If you begin with a heavily bullet-pointed agenda and objectives, you’ve already lost most of the audience. Instead, get them engaged from the very beginning. Mona did a good job of this by starting with a quote from Robert Frost – something rather unexpected. It was thought-provoking and provided the theme for the entire presentation.

Be sure to practice, practice, practice. You can’t be passionate and engaging unless you know your material. The more you practice, the better you’ll get. This approach takes practice because you can no longer depend upon your slides to prompt you what to say next. You need to know your material well.

Plan an active mental break every 15-20 minutes to keep your audience engaged. It’s nearly impossible for people to focus for longer than that when we are strictly passive participants. If your presentation is 20 minutes or less, then you don’t necessarily need to plan a break. If it’s more than 20 minutes, then have your audience do something active. An active mental break can be something very simple, such as asking the audience to write down an answer to a question or having them to turn to the person next to them and discuss a particular topic for two minutes.

Create a handout to accompany your presentation. Many presenters try to make their slides function as both a handout and a presentation and end up failing at both attempts. Slides should be designed to visually enhance (not summarize) your presentation. Handouts should be well-written comprehensive reports, containing detailed information such as (depending on your content) complex charts, data, analyses, and references. This approach takes time, but your audience will be grateful to take a well-written document with them, rather than just their scribbled notes.

The Reveal
The following are the madeover slides along with notes about what would be said while each is on screen.

With apologies to Robert Frost ...
“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

As I talk with you today about going down the “one less traveled by,” I’d like you to think about ...

Which path will you take? Hopefully, this presentation will help you think about that decision, because it will impact both you as a professional and your institution.

Let’s assume we chose to take the Road Less Traveled. Mile 1 on our journey is Strategic Alignment.

Is your institution revising its strategic plan? Is it considering moving to a new student information system or administrative suite? If you are a public institution, is there concern from the legislature about the level of faculty teaching? Think about how you might join or partner with the offices with primary responsibility for these initiatives.

For example, our office built a dashboard of data for the strategic plan steering committee (which included external constituencies). Also we served as the functional lead for the development of both faculty activity reporting and instructional workload reporting systems, working in partnership with the Division of Information Technology.
In a recent article, Gary Donhardt suggests the IR Office should expand beyond IPEDS and survey administration. Of course, you’ll still have to leave some resources behind to take care of those critical functions. But be brave and leap into new initiatives that align with your institution’s priorities. This can be scary and risky. Think about how you can adjust expectations so you can use resources to do what is expected AND what is important.

Three years ago, Maryland decided to join the KUALI consortium to develop an open source student system. I volunteered two staff members part-time to work on this. They started at 25% time and it eventually increased to 50% time. I first had to convince them that it had value for them as individuals, for our office, and for the university. They have become leaders nationally in functional development and business analysis. It has paid off big-time since the system is being built in ways that will enhance our data gathering and analysis abilities.

If you choose to take the road less traveled, it’s important to seek our strategic partnerships with other offices. We co-led the Provost’s Commission on Learning Outcomes with the Dean for Undergraduate Studies. We developed and manage the LO website and serve as half the Planning Committee. As a result we have become not only campus leaders, but national leaders in LO.

We saw the need for more data on faculty productivity and were introduced to the Academic Analytics tool. But it was an expensive undertaking, so I worked with the Graduate School and the Division of Research, to gauge campus interest in purchasing a membership. We ended up sharing the cost…and ownership across the three offices.
In this section, I would talk about sharing staff, inviting research staff from other units (Undergrad Admissions, Grad School, the Business School) into our office for support, entrepreneurial ventures (Stakeholders study), relinquishing day to day control, building on staff interests.

References and Recommended Reading


